

BEHULA

THE INDIAN "PILGRIM'S PROGRESS"

*A free translation from the original Bengali by
Rai Bahadur Dinesh Chandra Sen, D. Litt.)*

BY

CAPT. J. W. PETAVEL, R.E., (RETIRED),

*Lecturer on the Poverty Problem, Calcutta University, Principal Kasim-
hazar Polytechnic Institute, Author of 'Christianity & Progress',
'A Coming Revolution,' 'The Other Great Illusion,' etc.*

AND

KIRAN CHANDRA SEN,

WITH A FOREWORD

BY

THE HON'BLE JUSTICE

SIR ASUTOSH MOOKERJEE, Kt, C.S.I.,

M.A., D.L., D.Sc, Ph.D., F.R.A.S, F.R.S.E, F.A.S.B.,

Vice-Chancellor, Calcutta University.

CALCUTTA.

R. CAMBRAY & CO.,
Booksellers & Publishers,
9, Hastings Street

1923.

Price Two Rupees.

PUBLISHED BY D C KERR &
N. C. KERR.
Trading in the name of
R. CAMBRAY & Co.,
Law Booksellers,
9, Hastings Street, Calcutta.

Publications of the Calcutta University Poverty Problem Study.

MAN AND MACHINE POWER IN WAR AND RE-
CONSTRUCTION. Re. 1/8

SELF-GOVERNMENT AND THE BREAD PROB-
LEM. Boards, Re. 1/8, Cloth Re. 1-14

A NEW DEVELOPMENT IN PRACTICAL CO-
OPERATION. As. 2

UNEMPLOYMENT. Read with appreciation by the Rt.
Hon. the Prime Minister. As. 6

NON-CO-OPERATION AND THE BREAD PROB-
LEM. As. 6

Literature can be obtained in London from the Hon. Secretary. Edu-
cational Colonies Association, c/o. East India Association, 3, Victoria
Street, London, S W., and Captain Petavel's books on the subject from
Messrs. Allen & Unwin, Museum Street, Bloomsbury, London, W.C
Annual subscription for publications of Calcutta University Poverty
Problem Study Re 1/8. Rs. 4/8 for set up to date.

Printed by D. C. Kerr,
~~At the~~ Valmiki Press,
3, Halder Lane,
Bowbazar, Calcutta.

INTRODUCTION.

IN these introductory pages I shall just mention the philosophical and essentially Hindu interpretations of this legend as they have been given by many able Indian writers, confining my own comments mainly to the general lessons taught by it as by all ancient folk-lore.

At the present time, when human problems of all kinds are pressing urgently for solution, we want to read ancient literature, and perhaps especially folk-lore, to broaden our views of man and his problems, and help us form sound judgments on these most important of all questions; in 'Behula' we have one of those legends which, having entered into the heart of a people and dwelt there for centuries, have become human documents, revealing the soul, not of that particular people only, but of man generally.

The story is commonly accepted as describing the conflict between philosophical religion

INTRODUCTION

and popular beliefs and superstitions, and philosophy bringing about a compromise in the end—Siva making Chand accept the popular form of worship by telling him that he was not at the height of the lofty conception he had formed.

Hinduism emphasises strongly the need of the help given by religious symbolism. The Gospels, as we have had good occasion to see, are studied with great interest by Hindus as revealing faithfully and circumstantially the plan of a great Teacher to lead men to the true source of knowledge and understanding without removing the support they find in the outward sign; they admire them as teaching the simple religion that comes from the heart—the spirit of Truth that proceeds from the spirit of love shall lead you to knowledge; the Kingdom of Heaven is within you—but wisely centred on a great symbol. Christ indeed said that the truth He taught would be like a leaven hidden, and insisted on the importance of the sign He would give, saying, ‘If I be lifted up, I shall draw all men unto me;’ and the symbol, as a fact, is the great force in the world.

INTRODUCTION

To the Western reader the tales of gods and goddesses, by means of which Brahminism seeks to convey religious ideas to the masses, as illustrated so vividly by the picturesque description of Manasa Devi coming in her aerial chariot to the temple, erected in her honour, pp. 94 and 95, and in many other passages in the legend—seem fantastic, and the Hindu stories seem the strangest possible mixture of philosophy and fantasy; but the philosophy is the true Hinduism, for it insists that the symbolism is a crutch we must throw away as soon as we can walk without it.

From the point of view of the evolution of Hindu mythology, we certainly seem to see in this legend a means employed to help the introduction of a new worship and symbolism.

It is commonly believed by scholars that the original Saivism of the Aryans was philosophical and practically monotheistic; the legend seems to have been cleverly conceived, or at least cleverly utilised, to introduce a new polytheism.

But now let us come to 'Behula' simply as a human document revealing the heart of the people, apart from any interpretations,

INTRODUCTION

philosophical or religious. Every Bengali knows 'Behula,' as we might say of 'Pilgrim's Progress' in England. Every year during the rainy season when the snakes are most to be feared, songs in honour of the Queen of Snakes are sung with great fervour in all parts of the Gangetic plain. Boat-racing is a favourite sport of the riverside folk, who constitute a large proportion of the inhabitants of Eastern Bengal. At that season long boats, manned by numerous oarsmen, dart swiftly along the Meghna and the Dhaleswari, their crews singing songs about Manasa Devi, Queen of Snakes and Behula, the men and women on shore joining them in the chorus. Even the people of that country who have become Mahomedans cannot forget this beautiful Hindu legend. They too take part in these Hindu religious festivities carried away by the general fervour. Indeed some of the professional rhapsodists, who wander about Eastern Bengal singing those songs are Mahomedans: and we have a large number of manuscripts of the legend, copied by the followers of the Prophet, despite the strict injunctions of their Mullahs against participation in the rites and customs of other religions.

INTRODUCTION

The advent of modern ideas, and the flood of new literature from the printing press have taken nothing from the popularity of Behula ; on the contrary it is said that a printed copy of it is to be found now in almost every peasant home.

Of Dr. Sen's rendering, of which this little book gives a translation, more than twenty-five thousand copies were put into circulation in the course of about six years ; and it may be added that when the bioscope came, it had to ' screen ' ' Behula ' for the Indian public.

The first thing, perhaps, that we notice, is that the story is about heroic people who remind us of the Gospel words, ' He who endureth to the end shall be saved,' and ' The kingdom of heaven suffers violence, men of violence take it by force ; ' showing us faithfully that, however, much Hinduism may insist on the need of the symbol to help human weakness, it does not insist any less upon the fact that the strong are the pillars of religion.

A superficial judge might speak of Christianity as being distinctively the religion of the ' men of (spiritual) violence '—quoting the Gospel words—and Hinduism as being that of philosophic speculation on the one hand and

INTRODUCTION

superstition on the other. This judgment would be superficial indeed. The truth is that, in this respect as in all others, religion is everywhere fundamentally the same.

India has her great army of martyrs, ending with those who resisted the attempts of Mahomedan invaders to convert them by force ; and of her ascetics, who have endured the utmost suffering voluntarily to gain the pearl of great price, the whole world has heard. India is the country in which widows used to throw themselves on their husbands' funeral pyres, till a foreign government put an end to the practice. Some writers have, it is true, made far too much of that institution of *Suttee*, as it is called, others, in pointing out its abuses, have vilified it ; but none deny that many women met this most terrible form of death voluntarily, as a religious duty.

In Mr. Buckland's book 'Bengal under the Lieutenant-Governors, Vol. I, pp. 160, 161' may be read an account of one of the last *Suttees* that were allowed to take place, attended by the District Magistrate of Hoogly.

'Only two people accompanied me, a doctor and a chaplain, and they began to persuade the widow with all the reasons

INTRODUCTION

they could urge to dissuade her from her purpose. At length she showed some impatience and asked to be allowed to proceed to the pyre. But before she moved, the clergyman begged me to put her one more question, "Did she know what pain she was about to suffer?" She looked up at me with a scornful expression in her intelligent face and said for an answer, "Bring a lamp."...She put her finger into the flame. The finger scorched, blistered and finally twisted up, in a way I can compare only to what I have seen happen to a quill pen in the flame of a candle. She then said, "Are you satisfied?"

The book then tells how she was burnt alive without uttering a cry. This stoicism in Indian women was fostered by their religious education.

'Behula,' then, though the creation of poetic imagination, is not a poet's fancy, but is his representation of the profound and essentially heroic piety characteristic of men and women who are accounted truly religious in India.

Proud of our modern science, we have shown a tendency to speak of religious beliefs as the refuge of feeble folk. The truth, of course, is the very opposite, and no religion had illustrated this better than Hinduism, that shows us heroes and heroines keeping the flame

INTRODUCTION

of faith burning and guiding the multitude, who always follow the strongest lead.

Folk-lore like Behula, again, reminds us in a particularly striking manner, of the persistence and universality of certain fundamental religious conceptions. It shows us that, however formidable the differences of opinions and of religious doctrines may appear, those differences are but comparable, after all, to the great waves of the ocean that may rise like mountains, but are only transitory phenomena, because there is a level that the ocean keeps despite the utmost efforts of the storm.

Individual opinions about religion arise with new intellectual movements, local forms of belief come into being under the influence of local teachers, and of the vastly different symbolisms they employ; but when, escaping the clamour of sectarian and individual opinions, we seek, deep in the heart of the people, and in the teachings of great saints, the reposefulness of enduring beliefs, this general and permanent level becomes apparent to us.

The legend of Behula reflects the very truths expressed in the Christian religion by the words Atonement and Redemption,

INTRODUCTION

emphasising, indeed, the insistence on those teachings found in the Hindu sacred writings generally. Chand's error in thinking that he could find salvation by his own strength is summed up in the old man's discourse to him, pp. 88 & 89 as it might have been by a Christian writer, save only for the mention of Siva.

The question now agitating people is whether these universal beliefs are rational or irrational? In answer to that we may ask another question: Is it scientific or unscientific to suppose that our individual spirit is a molecule, as we might express it, of a greater Spirit; and that the life of the molecule, or microcosm, is dependent on the greater Life? To this question there can be but one answer. It is, in fact, entirely unscientific to imagine things otherwise. These fundamental religious beliefs are simply popular expressions of that entirely rational conception, with everything that would follow naturally from it.

However different in their outward forms, religions are the world-wide expression of man's dissatisfaction with his separate existence and its limitations, and his longings for something beyond; we find that wild and untutored men

INTRODUCTION

are as ferocious about their religion as wild animals are about their food, showing that religion supplies an elementary need in man.

In these world-wide and world-old facts, that are brought out in ancient folk-lore, all can see encouragement to persevere till they gain the gift that makes those who have received it live lives that are worth living, lives of great things done and of undying hope. The unbeliever, on the other hand, may declare that he is not himself conscious of his relation to the greater Life, he may declare himself an agnostic, but, with world-wide evidence against him, he can logically assume that attitude only in the profoundest humility. We have merely to take all the facts into account, and not some of them only, to see that we are confronted by an authority against which any individual scepticism or individual opinion of any kind is the very emblem of futility.

I began this introduction by saying that we want now to read the legend of 'Behula' from the point of view of the practical lessons to be found in all ancient legends, of which it is an example, and their bearing on the human problems that are pressing for solution, and

INTRODUCTION

I shall now pass to the reflections this beautiful story leads us to in connection with India's present-day problems, of which we are all thinking now. I am fully aware that some Indians will say that in doing this I am wandering from my subject, because it is only misleading to speak of India of to-day as bearing any resemblance to the India the legend depicts. People of the West, however, may not take that view, but will say that national characteristics, though they may be modified, cannot be obliterated, that inherited ideas and traditions may be concealed from view, but persist nevertheless, and strongly.

A character like that of Chand, the merchant, following his hereditary calling, apparently because to do so was his social duty as a Hindu, but caring little about business enterprise, and still less, we may believe, about who was governing the country, absorbed in his ideal, helps the Western student of India to understand this country that has submitted so long to foreign rule. He will see that the mixture of strength with weakness has been the cause of this strange abnormality; Pascal's words, that may be translated, 'We are

INTRODUCTION

sometimes strong by our weakness, and weak by our strength,' will come vividly to his mind, to humble the pride of the outwardly more successful races who have been the masters of the country ; he will think also of the Gospel words ' He that ruleth his heart is greater than him who taketh cities.'

The truth, of course, is that, as there is the good and the bad in all peoples, there is also the heroic and the squalid, only manifested in different ways, and what we have to do is to seek for the sublime and edifying in all, and to recognise, operative in all, the Power by which the common clay may become gold.

But now thought must lead to action, and sympathy to useful service, and the question, more pressing than ever at the present time, is in which ways these reflections on what is great and good in India, may lead us to serve her ; to our nation specially this question must be among the most urgent. A short digression may be pardonable here. Looking from the point of view of people to people, and not the relations of individuals of one people to those of another—from which of course any thing could be argued—we

INTRODUCTION

must ask ourselves to what extent we may have been comparable in our relations with India to a sharper who has taken advantage of the preoccupation of a philosopher with higher things to cheat him.

Varied as are the characters of the individuals who form peoples, distinctive national characteristics certainly do exist, and in a very marked way, in the form of national tendencies.

There is a tendency in the best minds in the East to turn to philosophical religion, whilst the Western mind tends strongly towards practical affairs, and the West with its great industrial development has ruined at least some of India's industries; whilst our nation, using its superior powers of organisation may certainly have imposed its will upon the people of India to a greater extent than was for their good. What can we do to heal the wounds we may have inflicted?

But this is one aspect only of the question. Under the feeling of wrong and humiliation, Indians are now asking themselves whether they must not awaken out of the old dreaming, out of the mentality of the past, with

INTRODUCTION

which they say they cannot survive in these times of competition and of organised might, and meet the West, as already one Eastern nation has done, with its own armoury. Apart, then, from justice, if we want to avert the calamity of one of the lights of the world losing its distinctive lustre, we must set ourselves to the great task of finding a way of working with India, side by side, in true comradeship, each people on its distinctive line, but in mutual helpfulness, spiritual and otherwise ; the great question at this critical time is what each one of us can do to help to bring this about.

This is no place for sociological and still less for political opinions, even if it be to give an answer to a burning question that becomes ten times more so whenever we are reminded of what is grand in India.

But in connection with this question, there are things to be said that are of such extraordinary interest and hopefulness, and so wholly uncontroversial, that every place is right for them, and very certainly this one is.

All agree now-a-days that, somehow or other, how exactly no prudent man will attempt to foretell, we shall have to adopt more

INTRODUCTION

co-operative systems of working. Perhaps we should be stating the position better by saying that our entire progress has been in the direction of greater co-ordination, which, of course, is co-operation under another name, and we have every reason to anticipate more rapid progress in that direction in the near future. This will give India her chance in every way and will demand of her that she shall preserve her traditional ideas and not change them.

There, then, is the answer to the question what we have to do in fellowship with India. The competitive system of the West has not given good results and the Western people are thinking now of retracing their steps, to some extent at least. For our own good, as much as for India's, we have to join hands with her and work together for a more rational and humane industrial system, in which she may be our equal and indeed perhaps our leader.

India at all events will be as much at home in the economic system we now hope for as she is a stranger to the competitive system in which the people of the keener and necessarily more energetic Western races must in many cases have the better of her.

INTRODUCTION

A co-operative system is at least not entirely divorced from idealism, and demands the particularly Indian form of public spiritedness expressed in the caste system, by which each individual has his place of utility to the whole community.

But now does all this mean anything that is tangible? What answer could be given to the question I asked just now as to what each of us can do to move things in this direction favourable to India?

We have learnt by bitter experience that human prejudices and passions stand fatally in the way of any reform, and impose severe limitations upon its progress.

But it is a fact, again, that an immense new hope has arisen recently from improved modern methods having rendered possible the utilization of unskilled labour, and even of the labour of children, when well organised and equipped. This opens up wonderful possibilities, and among them, very hopefully indeed, that of organising the children in co-operative productive organizations, and solving in that way the problem of popular education, even for the poorest communities, and we might say in one

INTRODUCTION

sense, specially for them, and nothing could be more hopeful for India than that.

Schools on that principle would indeed be a modern reproduction of the old Indian *Gurukula* which would be microcosms of co-operation, to lead to its general extension.

Now in this connection I shall confine myself to mentioning, as another great fact, that, following on this plan having been long and carefully studied in Calcutta University, an appeal* has just been issued

* The appeal is supported by Rabindranath Tagore, by the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Calcutta, the Hon'ble Justice Sir Asutosh Mookerjee, Kt., the Maharajah of Kocim-bazar and a hundred very representative citizens including the famous scientist, the Dean of the Faculty of Science of the University, Sir Prafulla Chandra Ray, Kt. (See *the Times, Educational Supplement*, 6th and 13th of May, 1922).

The following extracts from the appeal will show at all events that those who have issued it, encouraged by many of the most eminent economists of the world, have faith in a better future for India along these lines of economic co-operation :—

The genius of the people of India not lying in the direction of great organisation, the age of big factories has, in many cases, brought only a fatal competition to bear on her indigenous industries.

But the feeling has long forced itself upon all thoughtful people that there must be a way of using modern improved methods in agriculture and in industry, suitable to India, and that will enable her to benefit by progress instead of suffering by it.

INTRODUCTION

asking for funds to make a practical start in this direction.

What concerns us here is the importance of the modern tendency towards co-operative

Quite properly, then, India's premier University has made a special study of the applications of improved methods to India's needs, and specially for solution of her poverty problem—referring to Calcutta University Poverty Problem Study.

There is, not only a clearly indicated plan of advance for India but also clear steps leading to its realisation, and steps that are, from the very first, hopeful.

The appeal concludes.—

It will be seen, then, that it is for no ordinary work of charity that the undersigned are appealing. It is for the means of taking the first step in the application of a comprehensive plan to relieve poverty, that has been studied by the greatest university of one of the poorest countries, and submitted to eminent authorities in every part of the world, with entirely encouraging results a plan to *use improved methods in ways suitable to the conditions and requirements of that country*, to save its people from the poverty from which they now suffer through competition with the highly organised industries of the West.

There is now a great band of willing pioneers, ready to make any sacrifice if only they can show their fellow countrymen some way of escape from their present misery, and put their country on a clear road to *freedom via economic emancipation, which seems the surest way*.

If help is forthcoming now, it will be possible to put their energies to this constructive work, which may do enormous good not only to India but to other countries also by the example it will give and very specially to the British Empire, that also has both vast undeveloped resources, and unemployed people. But if the money is not forthcoming, and they are left without constructive programme, there is no knowing what disaster their misguided zeal may bring upon one of the most populous countries of the world.

INTRODUCTION

working in the connection of India's future with her past, but I am mentioning this appeal so strong in its significance as to the hopefulness of finding a way. There is not only a horizon of hope but a clear road to it, and those we look to for guidance are already now directing their gaze along it. To state it all in a few words: modern methods in agriculture and industry are so immensely superior to those commonly used in India, that if children in the schools were taught to work with them, they would very soon be able to produce as much in a few hours in the school industries as they would in the whole day in the family holding or workshops; education might thus be made in a true way self-supporting, the children producing articles for their homes, and the co-operative educational organisation would form, in every way, the easiest and most natural stepping-stone to an organisation of the kind, that, spreading throughout the whole country, could revive the ancient economic system of India in a modernised form.* Many of those

* See, *Report of the Calcutta University Commission*, Vol. VII, p. 18, and the publications of the Calcutta University Poverty Problem Study.

INTRODUCTION

who know India best can hardly conceive how she could establish a stable government under present conditions, but there seems to be hope that she could do it if she had a suitable economic system; under this one payments practically in kind might to a great extent take the place of money transactions, in government as well as private business simplifying many things. Co-operation is also the only known solution for the problem of unemployment among people of the upper castes, and of poverty among the peasant with too little land.

India, by giving this lead, might render eminent service to the world. *Ex oriente lux.*

After this digression, which I hope the pressing importance of the subject will fully excuse, I will conclude now with a few remarks about the history of this legend, the "Pilgrim's Progress" of India, and about this endeavour to give it in English. The compiler of the short, but very popular Bengali rendering of which this book gives a translation, Rai Dinesh Chandra Sen, Bahadur, B.A., D.Litt., known mostly for his monumental work 'The History of the Bengali Language and

INTRODUCTION

Literature,' holds that the legend may have originated in the 10th or the 11th century of the Christian era, and in any case, we have a manuscript of it by Haridutta who lived in the 12th century. The most popular poets of the Manasa cult are Narayan Deva of Mymensingh and Bijay Gupta of Barisal. Ketaka Das Kshemananda of Western Bengal wrote a poem on Manasa Devi in the 16th Century, which is shorter than those of the other poets, but remarkable for its tender pathos in describing the tragic scenes, unsurpassed perhaps by any other poets of the Manasa-Behula legend. Very many others of more or less distinction contributed to this literature. and among them Gangadas and Sashthibar of the district of Dacca, Baidya Jagannath, Bansidas, and Chandravati of Mymensingh must not pass unnoticed. Bansidas composed his poem towards the end of the 15th century, with the help of his gifted daughter Chandravati, whose Bengali recension of the Ramayana is popular in her district down to the present day. Dr. Sen in his 'History of Bengali Language and Literature' mentions by name no less than sixty poets living at various periods who wrote

INTRODUCTION

voluminously on this legend, and says that recent researches have revealed a great many more.

My young friend Mr. Kiran Chandra Sen translated the legend and I took it up from his translation and edited it with him. Every one knows the Italian saying "*Traduttore traditore.*" We do not hope to have done full justice to the beautiful Indian legend, so ably presented in Bengali, by Dr. Sen. For my own part, I have done my work of editing with a light hand.

Mythological lore has its peculiar charms and also its quaint inconsistencies. I have, on the whole, left the latter for the reader to explain and reconcile in whatever way he may like best.

I must mention also that I have given my share of the profit that may accrue from the publication of this little volume to the Calcutta University Poverty-Problem Study Fund, which was established to propagate knowledge of the facts I have spoken of above. I hope this statement and what it implies will help the indulgent reader to forgive me if I have given more detail than he would have

INTRODUCTION

asked for in this introduction, in speaking of the splendid prospects we now see of India becoming a leader and not a mere imitator.

Perhaps I may be forgiven also for saying that I hope that this may induce others to do something to support this effort to help India, now at the parting of the ways, to go towards peaceful progress along traditional lines, instead of allowing some of the worst manifestations of the modern spirit to lead her in the direction of dangerous social doctrines. The action Calcutta University has taken to help this effort, at this time of crisis in the country, is unique in the history of any university, and deserves the most earnest attention of all people of goodwill throughout the world, and the plan it has taken up for study, under the guidance of its eminent Vice-Chancellor, Sir Asutosh Mukerjee, namely, in a few words, that of building up a great co-operative organisation of the young, to be the foundation—both educationally and materially—of a new and better economic system, has been declared, not in India alone, but throughout the world, to be the most hopeful of the possibilities that

INTRODUCTION

progress seems to have opened up to us. Therefore, when I say that there is a clear line of action for our sympathy with India to lead us along, I am not expressing a mere personal opinion.

J. W. PETAVEL.

SENATE HOUSE, CALCUTTA,

The 20th April, 1922.

— o:—

BEHULA

I

CHAND SADAGAR, the merchant-prince, lord of the wealthy city of Champaknagar, was an ardent devotee of Siva ; but it had been ordained by Siva himself that unless Chand worshipped the goddess Manasa, Queen of Snakes, she would have no permanent place in the shrines of men.

That goddess, however, invoked by people who prayed for worldly gifts and material prosperity, was an object of abhorrence and contempt to the devotee of the God of the Ascetics. She was at her wits' end to know how to win homage from him.

She could not send her snakes to strike terror in his heart, because he had a power called *Mahajnana* which enabled him to

make their bites harmless ; and she had many difficulties to overcome before there was any possibility of making him yield. To deprive him of his *Mahajnana*, she visited him in the form of a beautiful woman, and set herself to captivate him by her charms. At last she succeeded, and the infatuated merchant-prince, failing to recognize his enemy appearing in this human form, surrendered to her his power, and she vanished in the sky like a streak of lightning. The next obstacle in her way was the great skill of Chand's friend, a physician, of the name of Sankar Garuri, who healed Chand's sons whenever one of her serpents bit them. The goddess tried long in vain to win the physician, but, failing to do that, succeeded in the end in taking his life.

At last now Chand was in her power. Within a year from that time his six sons, one after the other, were bitten by snakes and died. His wife Sanaka, in her terrible grief, bathed his feet with tears every day, imploring him to give way to the goddess ; his sons' young widows often cast entreating eyes on their father-in-law and tried in vain to make him relent. The whole household seemed to be begging their lord

to desist from this willfulness which could but bring dire calamity upon them. The old servant Nera went about his duties, wiping the tears from his eyes, and often falling at his master's feet in uncontrollable grief. Chand's friends from far and near entreated him to abandon the foolish contest with the goddess. His magnificent palace, once favoured by Lakshmi, the deity of wealth, and resounding with the merry laughter of children, was now gloomy as a cremation ground. But he was unmoved. With a heart broken with sorrow, he would knit his brow, and, carrying a stick of *hintal* wood in his hand, vow nothing but hatred of Manasa Devi for all the evil, she had brought upon him.

It was impossible for him to remain in a home so smitten, and with ceaseless reproaches of his friends and relations to add to his woes ; he would fain get away, even for a time, from these surroundings, and so made ready to sail for foreign lands to trade. He filled his seven great ships with valuable cargoes and manned them with skilled sailors from Chittagong, and the news of his departure was proclaimed throughout the city by beat of

drum. The ship in which he himself was to sail was the *Madhukara*—which means the bee—the largest and most beautiful of the whole fleet.

But whilst the ships carried her husband away to the great rivers, Sanaka lay crushed with grief in the palace. The little strength which remained in her to serve her husband seemed now to have forsaken her and her sorrows overwhelmed her.

In the whirling waters of the Kalidaha the ships encountered great dangers, and the goddess raised a violent storm, so that the rapids struck terror into the sailors' hearts, and soon they found their fears only too well justified, for the ships began to sink; a cyclone blew off their decks, and they were swamped. But Chand alone managed to escape death.

Chand, thrown into the water, prepared himself for death, repeatedly uttering the name of Siva. But as by Siva's decree, Manasa Devi was to find no new worshippers among men if Chand perished, the goddess threw down before him the *Padma*—the great lotus—with open petals which was her seat. Chand, seeing it

floating on the water, stretched out his hand to seize it, but suddenly remembering that *Padma* was one of the names of Manasa, withdrew his hand again in abhorrence.

After a long struggle he managed to reach the shore, now a beggar; he picked up a few rags from a cremation ground close by to cover his nakedness, and entered a neighbouring city. There he found that good fortune had brought him to the home of an old friend of his childhood, of the name of Chandraketu, now a wealthy merchant, to whom he dragged himself, faint with hunger and overcome with fatigue.

Chandraketu was unspeakably shocked at the terrible plight in which he saw his old friend; he ordered his servants to bring everything necessary to clean and clothe him decently, whilst he himself superintended the prompt preparation of a sumptuous meal. He then led his friend to the dining hall, and, seated by his side, whilst the servants were hastily bringing the dishes, entreated him to make peace with the goddess. In the course of a discussion that followed, the merchant found that his friend was one of

those who had already learnt to pay homage to the Queen of Snakes, and that he had in his house a temple dedicated to her. This irritated him so much that without touching a morsel of food he scornfully left the house and throwing aside the clothes given to him by his friend resumed his rags; refusing even to reciprocate the cordial feeling of Chandraketu, he addressed Manasa Devi and said: 'Live by playing on fools—*Kani*.' *Kani*, i.e., the one-eyed woman, was among the many abusive names Chand used towards her.

To save himself from starvation he then begged for alms of the villagers. Keeping the grains he received in a secure place, he went, like a pious Hindu, to take his bath in a neighbouring pond, before eating. But whilst he was bathing, Manasa Devi sent a great mouse to eat up all the corn, so that when he came back not a grain was left. He looked up angrily to heaven and addressing Manasa Devi again in a subdued voice said: 'My six sons are dead and I have borne it, hunger will not kill me—rest assured.'

The merchant-prince, who had at one time entertained his friends with rich dishes,

BEHULA

was reduced now to satisfying his hunger by eating plantain-skins. After a while, he met some wood-cutters on their way to the forest, who, out of pity for him, suggested his earning his livelihood by cutting wood and selling it in the market. Almost naked, clad only in rags, but shining like molten gold, and with a perfect tranquillity reigning on his countenance, he then looked like his god Siva.

Chand had good knowledge of the varieties of wood. He selected sandal wood and made a bundle of it and set out for the village market; but the goddess would not allow him to carry out his plans; at the behest of Manasa Devi, Hanumana, the son of the Wind-God, placed his toe unperceived on Chand's bundle and made it so heavy that he could not carry it. In whatever he attempted the goddess caused him similarly to fail, and at last he was reduced to accepting the situation of a menial servant in the house of a Brahmin.

But here even the goddess pursued him. His master sent him to pick out the weeds from the paddy fields, but Manasa Devi cast a spell upon him, which rendered him unable to

distinguish the paddy from the weeds, so that he plucked the plants instead, and was angrily dismissed by the Brahmin ; he then began to wander about despondently in the forest, muttering bitter reproaches against Manasa. But again trouble was to come to him. By scaring birds away he disturbed some fowlers who were at work near-by ; they abused him for a rogue, asking him what business he had there. Chand uttered not a word, but meekly bore their upbraidings, so that they took him for a fool and left him and, as his last and only consolation, he prayed again to his deity.

It was then dusk. The soft rays of the setting sun lighted up the tops of the trees. The peasants' rustic songs were heard echoing in the woods ; and the darkness which had hitherto been confined to the forest, was beginning gradually to spread out till at last it would embrace the whole earth. Our hero, in his ragged dress, looked like a naked figure of gold, as he fixed his gaze to the sky, and said with folded palms : ' Oh Siva, your devotee expects nothing but content ; he prays that his faith and reliance on thee may not be shaken and that he may not be allured by

worldly prizes and lose his trust in thee.' In that lonely wood, the helpless merchant-prince, having been reduced to a state of the utmost destitution, shed only a few tears as a tribute of devotion at the feet of his divine lord—the Siva.

II

AT LAST after suffering the greatest possible hardships, Chand got back to his home, where his unhappy wife wept bitterly over her husband's wasted form. Her sorrows were greater still as she was told of the misfortune that had come upon him and of the loss of his men and of ships, including the beautiful *Madhukara* and her gallant crew. Calamities always crowd in upon a family, deserted by Lakshmi, the goddess of fortune; and the loss of that beautiful ship seemed to Sanaka to be a sign that the goddess was leaving their house for ever; her scarlet-dyed foot-steps which only the devotees can see, grew faint in Sanaka's eyes. She wept piteously at all these terrible tidings of death and misfortune, and asked her husband again and again where their splendid ships and their skillful sailors were.

Night and day her mind burnt in anguish ; once she raised her tearful eyes heavenwards, and addressing Manasa Devi said : ‘ Our earnest attempts to inspire devotion for thee in my husband’s heart have failed ; send us some one, O divine mother, who may succeed in doing what seems impossible to us.’

But by and by the cheerful sounds of conch-shells, of gongs and of bells were heard again in the merchant’s house. The neighbours cried out : ‘ A son is born to Sanaka ; but will her headstrong lord sacrifice him as he has done the rest, by persisting in his insane quarrel with the goddess ? But what a splendid baby !—he is bright as the moon.’

Just as the sea surges up at the rising of the full moon, the grief-stricken heart of Sanaka, which had been depressed so long, overflowed with affection at the sight of the babe’s lovely face. A mother’s joy heals up old wounds and brings new rapture. But will this cherub son be sacrificed also?—This fear was always arising in her mind but the new ecstasy that had come to her drove it away again ; notwithstanding it all, however, a chill would often

come over her heart and shrivel up her hopes like grass before the flame.

Haunted by a dread that the goddess Lakshmi would abandon her home, she gave her son the name of Lakshmindra to propitiate that deity. The devotee father, inspite of his religious detachment from everything of the world, could not suppress his natural feelings of joy at the sight of the new-born babe. But his rare beauty filled him with misgivings. If that son too should fall a victim to the wrath of Manasa Devi how would he be able to bear the calamity? He began to pass sleepless nights praying to his god for strength of mind.

His astrologer told him privately that his dear son was to die on his marriage night. This thought haunted him like a nightmare. He began to seek that bliss which is far above all mundane pains and happiness. But, alas, he was like one seeking for gems in the dark! 'Siva', 'Siva' were the words constantly uttered by him. He did not tell his wife of the terrible prediction of the astrologer, but tried to summon all his strength to his aid to bear this trial, should it come upon him.

BEHULA

Time went on, and the years of Lakshmindra's childhood passed. Sanaka was always busying herself attending to every little thing for the welfare and comfort of her son ; her love was unbounded. Chand, however, did not outwardly show any sign of fondness for him. He would fain have pressed his lips against his son's a hundred times ; he would fain have gazed again and again on that lovely face ; but whenever the desire arose in his mind he suppressed it. He became cruel to himself in striving to sever earthly attachments. Sanaka, who could not rightly guess the reason, attributed her husband's indifference to his unhappiness ; it was, she thought, due to this that his heart had ceased to be tender, and he had become so indifferent.

Lakshmindra grew up a clever and handsome youth and became the centre of everyone's joy in his father's house. He was called *Durlava*—the priceless one ; he had come to his parents after they had gone through unheard of sorrows and so was most beloved of all.

With great diligence and ability he soon mastered the details of the ancestral business and was well-read in drama and

in poetry and skilled in rhetoric. He was the pride, not only of Chand and his family, but of the whole city of Champaknagar. He was sought after by all, and everyone loved to be in his company. His father alone had to check the cravings he had for the enjoyment of his society. He dared not love him and when inclined to embrace him he could not, in his dread for the future, do even so much as look him in the face and speak to him freely. The constant repetition of the name of his god was his only consolation !

When time came to seek a wife for Lakshmindra, Sanaka felt that the gloom that had hung over the house, would now at last be relieved. No lips can tell what she had suffered during these years in that house of mourning, and how it had smitten her heart to partake of rich food when her six daughters-in-law, being widows, were forbidden to take anything but the plainest fare. When she wore the red mark of luck on her forehead, furrowed with deep lines of sorrow, she could not suppress her tears, as she thought that the beautiful young widows of the house were not privileged even to touch the box of the red powder.

She felt all that time that there was no one for whom she might purchase beautiful articles of apparel or whose forehead she might adorn with the vermillion, that she had none whose lips could wear the reddening hue of *Tambula* to gladden her eyes. Poor bereft woman, what could she do? She wept for her daughters-in-law and fasted often on various pretexts, although they tried in vain to conceal from her their inward grief. When dressing her hair with a golden comb her eyes would often become heavy with tears. All the luxuries that the middle-aged matron of the house had for herself were denied to the youthful widows who ought to have been young wives keenly enjoying them all. How could a woman, advanced in years, take pleasure in *Tambula*, or rich meals, or even in dressing her hair when the young women in the family had to live lives of austerity?—Yet how could she break the rules of her people and country?

Now, however, the time had come for more cheerful days, for, it was time for Sanaka to appeal to her husband to get a wife for their son. ‘I long,’ she said, ‘to hear the merry sounds of the playful anklets on the feet of my

daughter-in-law in my house, and to see them painted with scarlet and leave red marks on my courtyard to make my heart glad. (Oh! the joy it will be to me to see the lucky marks on a daughter-in-law's forehead!')

But Chand felt at this proposal a shudder such as one walking in the dark night feel if his feet suddenly touched a serpent; for, the astrologer's fatal prediction came to his mind. He abruptly rejected her appeal and went away to his outer chamber. She remained there transfixed like a marble statue. Evening came: the cool breeze of the river, coming into the room through the grated windows, found her there still, and played on her curling tresses; later Venus piercing the western sky made the tears glitter that trickled down the cheeks of that unhappy woman whose pride had been so cruelly wounded. Her burden of sorrow seemed more than she could bear. In the evening her son entered the inner apartments of the palace to have his meal lovingly placed before him by his mother, but he went back disappointed for the first time in his life. Hours passed by unnoticed, but Sanaka wept on bitterly. She had never been accustomed

BEHULA

to such harsh treatment from her husband, whose never-failing and tender affection had hitherto sustained her through all the terrible sorrows of her life ; but that comfort was gone now and she was crushed.

Several hours after this when night had come, the merchant retired to his chamber and found Sanaka standing still as a picture with marks of tears that dried on her cheeks and bending her head low just as she was when he had left the place so long ago. He was deeply moved and drew her to him and said tenderly, 'Are you, dear queen, here ever since I left you ? ' The soft tone touched her heart, and tears, this time, of tenderness, fell on her husband.

Chand knew that her heart would be broken if he told her of the dire prophecy ; besides, what proof was there, he thought, that the soothsayer's prediction would ever come true. But still the idea of his son's marriage was fraught with misgivings. It was like a nightmare to him ever since Lakshmindra was born, and he could not decide what to do.

Wiping away his wife's tears he said tenderly that as Manasa Devi was still his enemy it was to be feared that she might not

allow them to enjoy the desired happiness ; so he dared not bring another bride to that smitten home with its six bereaved wives.

Sanaka sobbed and said : ' It breaks my heart to notice you showing indifference to our Lakshmindra. You have all along been cold to my darling—this coldness has always caused me great sorrow ; he is the treasure of our house, but you hardly even look at him—so stern you are ! Have you decided that he is to live and die unmarried ? Manasa Devi will not put you to the test again. Who can fill my vacant home excepting Lakshmindra's bride ? Oh, how earnestly do I wish to enjoy the blessings of life once again with my son and his wife. Pray, do not be cruel.' And saying this she threw herself at her husband's feet and implored him to grant her prayer.

A cloud passed over Chand's brow and he fell into a deep thought. ' Who after all,' said he to himself, ' can know that the astrologer's prediction will prove true ? Moreover, I can take such precaution that it will be impossible for my enemy to carry out her evil designs. The ardent longing of my unhappy wife must be satisfied.'

BEHULA

Chand raised up Sanaka's drooping form, leaning on him like a creeping plant, and said : 'Don't be sad, dear wife. It will be done as you wish ; I will get a bride for Lakshmindra. Send for Janardan, the family priest, and he will seek one worthy of our beloved son.'

III

JUST at that time Behula, a daughter of Saibene, the merchant of Nichchaninagar had reached her fourteenth year having grown up as sweet in character as she was lovely in person, with her dancing locks touching her back with many a pretty curl. Her voice was soft as the cuckoo's and when she danced all were charmed by her extraordinary grace of form and movement. So graceful was she, that she was called 'Behula, the dancing bride.' Above all her charms, however, shone her deep piety which had gained for her a degree of respect such as girls of her age rarely command. Where angry passions raged and high words were spoken, her mere presence was enough to calm the storm ; for, where she was, there could be only love. Her meditative and

serious looks would surprise her companions at play. Often, as a little girl, she was seen contemplating the sun-set in such thoughtful mood that nobody would dare interrupt her meditation.

All looked to her for sympathy and comfort in sorrow. She would take lovingly in her lap the head of a poor widow, frenzied with grief at her bereavement and, tenderly caressing her dishevelled tresses, would weep tears of sweet sympathy and the poor woman would take her for a goddess, come down to console her in her distress.

When watching a *Sati* with the bride's crimson mark of luck on her forehead ascending her husband's funeral pyre to be silently consumed, the sight would fill her mind with strange feelings in which the mysteries of life and death would seem to reveal themselves to her.

Sometimes when reading the sad tale of Sita's trials, tears would be seen running down her cheeks till she could read no more. But when she read about Savitri restoring her dead husband to life, after surmounting unheard of difficulties, the virtuous and edifying influence

of the tale would fill her heart, and she would, for a time, forget all about herself and the world outside.

When she had come to her fourteenth year, her father seeking a suitable husband for her, met Janardan and was hold that he was in quest of a desirable bride for Lakshmindra, son of Chand, the merchant-prince of Champaknagar and both were delighted at what seemed to them a highly desirable match.

When Chand heard about Behula, he proceeded forthwith to Nichchaninagar in a stately palanquin of gold, followed by a large retenue of servants, each carrying different articles of food and valuable jewellery for presentation to Saibene on the occasion.

Sai, the merchant, received him with warm cordiality and when Chand saw Behula he was deeply impressed by her rare spirituality and exquisite beauty. It was no ordinary girl that met his eyes. It was as though Lakshmi, the goddess of fortune, had left her lotus seat and had descended on earth and stood before him. To Chand, the scarlet hue that adorned her feet, seemed to be the radiance of the goddess' lotus throne. His wife's aching heart

BEHULA

would surely be soothed by having her for her daughter-in-law, he thought. But next moment he resumed his wonted attitude of indifference, as he feared that he was again being drawn to the world by ties of affection. In an instant he stifled the awakening hope of worldly happiness and became absorbed in the realisation of that supreme bliss which lies far above this material world, as he saw in his mental vision the glorious figure of Siva, his god.

Chand, aware of the girl's extraordinary powers, wished to have a proof of them and said to Sai that he would be glad to see his son married with his daughter, but that, according to a time-honoured custom of his family, he must put her to a test. The test, he demanded, was that she should cook small iron balls to be served up at his dinner. If she was a suitable bride for his son, she should be able to make the iron balls soft and palatable like corn. Behula's mother Amala was astounded at this proposal. No one, she thought, had ever heard of iron balls becoming tender and good to eat. Saibene was dejected by this extraordinary proposal which, he thought, could

BEHULA

never be carried out, and he wondered whether the merchant was quite sane.

But Behula did not hesitate a moment and reassuring her parents said: 'Why are you afraid? I have been regularly observing our religious rites all the months of the year and have worshipped the gods and goddesses in proper season, and with their help shall do what you consider impossible.'

A new fire place was made. Two dozen small iron-balls were put in a pan with water and Behula sought the blessings of the gods in silence and kindled the fire. The iron balls slowly dissolved. Sai and his wife were astonished. 'Who is she in our house in the guise of a daughter?' They thought. Her playmates whispered to each other 'Surely our companion is not a common girl like us.' The neighbours thought 'This little girl, endowed as she is with superhuman powers, is no doubt some earth-bound angel.' Chand Sadagar thought that Behula was the fittest bride for his son. The astrologers also added the weight of their declarations as to the suitability of the match as they compared the horoscopes of the bride and bridegroom.

On his return home, Chand began to make magnificent preparations for the approaching marriage ceremony; to defeat the deadly purpose of the Queen of Snakes, he appointed a skilled architect to construct a steel building on the hills to be used as the bridal chamber and supervised the work closely himself leaving all his other work to his assistants. A great steel building with strong roof and massive doors was erected, the iron gate of which seemed to touch the sky. It was made impregnable in every respect and when complete, it looked like the prison of the God of Death. Armed sentinels were stationed on all sides of the building. A large number of ichneumons with chains attached to them were let loose and they ran about outside the four walls of the iron structure. Their sharp claws and teeth were ever ready to clutch at a snake and tear it to pieces. At a little distance, a flock of peacocks with their wings unfurled were roaming about. Their restless looks indicated their eager desire to feast themselves on any reptiles that might come their way. Round the building were strewn different species of plants and herbs which diffused odours unbearable to snakes, so that they fled to far off forests.

All these arrangements struck Manasa Devi in her heavenly home with dismay. She appeared before the architect of the iron building and asked him to make a small hole in one of the walls. He made respectful obeisance to her but asked her on what pretext it would be possible for him to re-enter the building when it had been made over to Chand with handsome remuneration and rich presents. But the goddess only frowned, and who in the world was so bold as not to fear her displeasure? The architect was overawed and he promised to carry out her command, and on the pretext of scrutinising his work over again, he entered the iron hall, and having secretly made a hole in one of the walls, filled it with coal-dust.

Lakshmindra now set out for his father-in-law's house for the wedding ceremony. Nothing had been left undone to make the marriage procession pompous and splendid in every detail. Among the numerous relatives who accompanied him, some rode on horse-back, some on elephants and some were carried in palanquins. All were richly dressed and displayed a profusion of gold and jewellery in

their apparel. In the darkness of the night they looked like the rays of the midday sun.

But as Lakshmindra was passing through the gate of the palace to join the procession, the first ill omen befell him. His turban coming in contact with the lintel of the gateway, was knocked off. It was soon picked up by one of his attendants and placed on his head again and the occurrence escaped Sanaka's notice, but not Chand's; he was seized with deadly fear.

But never in those parts had a wedding ceremony been more magnificent. Fourteen hundred high-born gentlemen of the *Bania* caste accompanied the bridal party; three hundred bards followed, singing songs, composed specially for the occasion. A large number of gardeners, barbers, weavers and numerous concert parties, and seven thousand men in charge of fire-works advanced towards Nichhanagar. Seven hundred and seventy litters, made of gold and silver, were in the procession. Chand Sadagar, surrounded by his friends and relations, and seated on an elephant with richest trapping, and with a carpet *hauda* on, fringed with diamond-pendants and pearls,

followed the party, flanked by hundreds of torch-bearers. In the middle of the procession Lakshmindra, who now looked transcendently beautiful, came along magnificently mounted on a noble steed; he wore a crown on his head, studded with precious stones, and round his neck were garlands of fresh flowers and a necklace of pearls; according to the time-honoured custom he held in his hand a small mirror, a miniature bill-hook and a plantain leaf; on the crest of his turban were floral offerings dedicated to the goddess Chandi to invoke her blessings, and in the hem of his gold embroidered scarf, a lemon was tied.

Amala received her son-in-law with all the formalities proper to the occasion. She took up a golden lamp and surveyed his face affectionately. She had six sons and in her heart she at once installed Lakshmindra as her seventh.

When for an instant, Lakshmindra and Behula's eyes met, they were enchanted with each other. The bliss of that moment was ineffable to them; the experience of this new ecstasy of which they had been ignorant only a few minutes before, made them feel that their

BEHULA

lives would become barren if they were to live separated.

The marriage ceremony was to take place under a specious and gorgeous canopy, decked with flowers and foliage, adjoining Amala's bed chamber. It was a magnificently furnished one with its ceiling supported by pillars, crowned with heads of tigers, its lofty roof seeming to touch the sky. It was also the abode of singing birds and was called the *Udaytara*. On the terrace a golden umbrella stood open under which Lakshmindra took his place dressed in a cloth of crimson silk. But a shudder went through the festive assembly as the umbrella gave way and fell upon the heads of the couple when Lakshmindra was reciting the marriage hymns. Amala noticed the ill omen more than any one else and deadly fear seized her. In a moment, however, her husband opened the umbrella again and the ceremony proceeded.

At a little distance away could be seen Chand's stately figure with his eyes lifted heavenwards and with the *hintal* stick in his hand. His countenance indicated the gravest apprehension as he fixed his eyes upwards in a

prayerful attitude ; an invocation was repeatedly heard to escape his lips. When the ceremony was over, Chand proposed to Sai that he would presently start for Champaknagar with his son and the bride, despite the custom that the married couple should spend the night in the house of the bride's father. Nilmani Das of Burdwan most emphatically protested against the suggestion, and was supported by Dhanapati, one of Chand's uncles. Amala and other ladies of the locality, assembled for the occasion, protested also strongly against that unheard-of proposal.

Chand then sought a quiet interview with his new relation, Behula's father ; but so overpowered was he by his emotion that he was unable, for a long time, to speak ; tears rolled down his cheeks, and Sai stood before him struck dumb at his strange behaviour. At last he said in faltering accents : ' My friend, please excuse my weakness, but it is not a trifle that has moved me thus. Alas ! it has been prophesied that my son is destined to die by a snake-bite in his nuptial chamber. My six sons fell victims to the ire of Manasa Devi ; you may perhaps have heard of the hostility

BEHULA

between the goddess and myself. I have erected a well fortified steel building on the Sonthali hills at the extremity of Champaknagar. My son and his bride must be lodged there this night. After the fatal night is over and everything is safe, Lakshmindra will come here with his wife and you will be able to enjoy their society as long as you may wish. My son is now your son too. You will wish also to see him protected from danger.' Saibene was shocked to hear this. 'Why did you' he said, 'conceal all these things from me? If I had been aware of this I would never have consented to this marriage. It is impossible, however, that I should oppose the precaution you desire to take; so let the bride and bridegroom go to the place of safety you have prepared for them.'

IV

THE magnificent marriage ceremonies were brought in this unwonted manner to a close full of misgivings for all the participants, and Chand then led his son and daughter-in-law to the steel house, over which he was to watch all night, stick in hand, to keep the sentries on the alert.

As Behula entered the building, she trembled with a strange fear. Her fear was increased when she saw her husband, as though forgetting her and everything else, fall at once into what appeared a heavy sleep. Deep misgivings came over her as, with her eyes glistening with tears, she sat down on a corner of the bed on which he lay.

By a careless movement of her hand she wiped off from her forehead the red mark of luck. She now looked like a streak of light, half-concealed by clouds, for, through her melancholy, shone her beauty—bright as the sun. She restored the vermilion on her forehead and sat quietly watching her sleeping lord.

She had already come to know of the ominous prediction. As Lakshmindra slept, she gazed on him, as the priest does on the deity he worships. The garland of flowers he wore was hanging loosely about his breast, and as he lay there, adorned with marks of sandal paste, he looked like a sylvan deity. In putting his garland straight on his breast she touched him lightly and he woke and entreated her to come closer to him to be locked in his embrace. The bashful maiden moved away.

Lakshmindra, still in his strange sleepiness, was soon unconscious again of her presence. Behula again came near her husband and sat silently watching him. When he woke again he saw his wife seated in a corner of his bed, bright as a golden statue, and said to her: 'I do not know why at this dead hour of night, I feel a strange hunger. Could you, dear one, cook something for me and pardon me for such a request at this time.' Then again he fell fast asleep. How was she in the bridal chamber, and at such an hour of the night, to have all that was necessary to prepare the food he had asked for? But there was an earthen pot and some rice placed there for the performance of certain marriage rites and there were for the same purpose some green cocoanuts with which, she saw, she would be able to build a rough fire-place, using the milk of the nut to cook the rice in, and her clothes to kindle the fire.

Whilst this was going on in the bridal chamber let us see what the dreaded goddess was doing in her abode in the clouds that hovered on the horizon? She was busy summoning her snakes to despatch them on their errand. Above her dwelling was a burning

flame which wavered like a banner ; the priceless gems from serpents' hoods glittered everywhere in her room. Snakes of such various kinds as one could hardly believe to have existed, of all sizes and every imaginable colour, hastened to attend the call of the goddess from every direction. As they rushed on they looked like flashes of lightning, casting a lurid glow around them.

When the Devi enquired who amongst them could go and kill Lakshmindra, all bent their hoods low in mute obeisance. A snake whose eyes burnt like living fire, apparently of a savage mood, broke the silence by saying : ' Oh Queen, thy orders are law to us, but no snake can go near that spot and live. The poisonous emanations of the herbs planted on the Sonthali hills choked me as I inhaled them.' The three-headed *Mahijangha*, came forward next, displaying its venomous fangs, and said : ' Who will save us from those dreadful peacocks and ichneumons? My cousins have been obliged to desert the hills which were for many generations their ancestral home, and have fled to the Southern mountains for fear of those terrible creatures.' *Damsaka*,

whose eye-balls were rolling with rage, then advanced and said: 'Chand Sadagar has brought all the snake-charmers of the world to the Sonthali hills. Whenever they come across a hole, they utter mysterious *mantras* and throw poisonous roots into it, and if unfortunately any serpent happens to repose there, he is sure to die. No doubt the building has a small hole by which we could enter it—but the sentinels around it have taken so much opium and drugs that their red eyes are a terror to us, and we dare not approach them.'

These excuses only angered the goddess. 'I do not like,' she said, 'to hear all these arguments from you. Is there no one who will face the danger, and entering by the little hole, I have had made for the purpose, bite Lakshmindra? Everyone of you are well aware of the perils but we need not wait to hear them told here by cowards. I want the boldest amongst you to come forward and speak.'

As the Devi said thus, the snake *Bankaraj* spread out its ample hood and touched her feet submissively and rushed towards the Sonthali hills.

BEHULA

At that moment, in the fortified abode, intended to keep her husband safe, Behula was cooking the rice he had asked for. Every now and then an ominous sound came from various directions, which added terror to the dreadful night. Could it be the breath of the sleepless merchant, who struggled to suppress the anguish of his soul and was guarding the chamber from outside, in tense anxiety? Suddenly Behula became aware that coal dust was falling from the wall in one corner of the chamber. Through the hole, made by the architect of the building, the snake *Bankaraj* now entered the chamber. Behula put a little milk and some plantains in a golden cup and held it to the snake and, unable to resist the tempting food, it began to eat, when she secured it with a golden chain. Later in the night, the serpents *Kaladanta* and *Udaykala* were successively captured by Behula in a like manner. Towards dawn she called Lakshmindra to take his meal, but he was then in deep sleep, out of which he could not be aroused.

One after another snakes came, and all that she could manage to do, with all her

wonderful skill, was to fasten them with golden chains. But the goddess would not be defeated in her purpose by the girl. Anxiety for the safety of her husband coupled with her physical exhaustion made it easy for Manasa Devi to cause a drowsiness to come over her, so that, when for a moment she sat by her husband, she closed her eyes; but though they were soon again fixed on the hole through which the snakes had come, it was with an unconscious stare.

Urged by Manasa Devi, the snake *Kalnagini* approached the chamber, when it stopped short in deadly fear, as some one shouted from outside 'who is there?' in a loud hoarse voice. The snake remained motionless for a while. It was Chand's voice that it had heard. Who can ever describe the anguish that was then agitating his breast? When everything was calm again, *Kalnagini* slowly proceeded to the room. Behula had a little while before succumbed to sleepiness, and now lay by the side of her husband, unconscious of the approach of the enemy; sleep it was, but not rest; deep furrows of anxiety marked her forehead.

BEHULA

In great haste *Kalnagini* drew near Lakshmindra, who in sleep moved his feet a little, and the snake, startled by his movement, bit him instantly.

Lakshmindra cried: 'Wake Behula, dearest, see, bitten by a snake, I am dying.'

Aghast with horror, Behula woke up and saw the snake rushing out of the room through the hole: at once with a small chopper, she cut off a part of its tail, and the wounded snake disappeared at once.

The sun had now risen in the eastern horizon and motionless, like a statue, was the tall figure of Chand standing at the doorway of the bridal chamber with the *hintal* stick in his hand, like the great god Siva, carrying his trident. The night had passed and he thought the danger was over. But why then did his heart still beat in fear and his eyes cast an alarmed look on all sides?

V

ANXIOUSLY as Chand had spent that night of vigil, the silent torture suffered by his wife in her home, vaguely dreading a fresh calamity, was still more terrible. No sooner had the

BEHULA

twilight made its first appearance than she hurried to the Sonthali hills to see how her son and her daughter-in-law had passed the night, and to offer them her blessings. But her heart sank within her as she heard the sound of stifled wailings proceeding from the chamber. As her attendants pushed the door, it swang open, for, Behula had opened it pursuing the snake but had not bolted it again. Her soft murmurings of grief were now distinctly heard. 'How smitten am I! My beloved, I shall hear no more thy sweet speech. Here am I to break my bracelets of shell and wipe away from my forehead the lucky mark. Brighter than the sun or the moon shone thy perfect beauty; a snake has bitten thee and thy beauty is faded. Still thy fingers are as beautiful and soft as buds of the *Champaka* flowers. Open thine eyes, oh lord, and see the despair of thy hapless wife!'

When she entered the chamber, followed by her attendants, Sanaka saw Behula seated on her bed with her dead husband's head on her lap; her dishevelled tresses were hanging loosely on her back and her forehead still shone bright with the vermilion mark. She was sobbing but as soon as they entered the chamber

BEHULA

she became silent. Only one tear still stood on her cheek as a sign of the agony of her grief. Sanaka's attendants began to abuse the unlucky bride: 'Unfortunate Behula, it is thy bad luck that has caused the death of thy husband on the night of his union with thee. The vermilion mark is still fresh and bright on thy forehead, the red dye on thy feet has not yet lost its lustre, and so soon evil comes to thee, the son of our lord—the only lamp of the house lies dead in the bridal chamber!'

Sanaka fell down unconscious on the ground like an uprooted tree as she beheld the pale face of her son. Chand had already left the place. Behula did not hear the abuse nor did she pay any heed to anything they were saying. Her mind travelled far away from the spot. She was thinking that she did not, out of shyness, embrace him when he had wished it, nor could she give him any food when he had asked her for it. Alas! his last trifling requests had not been granted to him. Her heart broke with remorse. She thought indeed that she was an unlucky wretch, or else whose destiny was so cruel? Who else had

BEHULA

ever lost her husband on her marriage night? Her eyes were about to rain a flood of tears but she kept them back.

Once she lifted her eyes and cast a glance at her unconscious mother-in-law whose noble form lay there on the ground as a goddess from heaven. Alas! she was not permitted to taste the joys of wedded life in that house with such a noble and loving mother-in-law!

Lakshmindra's dead body was now carried by his kinsmen to the banks of the Gangoor. Behula did not behave as a bashful girl that she was the day before as the new bride, but followed the funeral procession. A funeral pyre was made of scented wood. Behula stood near the pyre and said: 'If you burn my husband's body I shall throw myself into the fire and die, a *Sati*. But it is against the custom to burn the body of a person bitten by snake; be pleased to make a raft ready and set it afloat on the river, with the body placed on it, so that it may perchance be restored to life by the art of some snake-charmer. I will accompany the dead.'

Everybody approved Behula's suggestion but none believed her intention to accompany

BEHULA

the corpse ; it was, they thought, the raving of a bereaved soul.

But as Behula stepped into the raft and sat near the corpse, every one shuddered. Even those who had abused her, attributing the death of Lakshmindra to her ill-luck, begged her to return. Never before had such a thing been seen. 'Most women' they said, 'whether young or old, live as widows after their husbands die, and do not entertain vain hopes of their dead husbands coming back to life.' With tearful eyes they clasped her soft and beautiful arms and in vain entreated her again and again to give up such a terrible resolve. But she remained seated on the raft motionless. Maddened with grief and with her person covered with dust, Sanaka came weeping to the banks of the river and cried : 'Come, my unfortunate girl. Let us go home ; I shall try to forget my misfortune in your company ! On the marriage day, observing the usual rites, you fasted ; come my poor girl to take a handful of rice at our house.' But Behula remained motionless and made no answer.

It was now noon ; intense interest prevailed in the city [and the banks of the

BEHULA

Gangoor were crowded with men and women, who thronged there to witness the pathetic sight. The spectators were overcome and only in broken accents could they give expression to their feelings. 'Oh! beautiful bride,' they said, 'do not leave the house thus. True you have lost your husband, but the citizens of Champaknagar will respect the wife of their prince as their mother. Pray do not leave us.' Sanaka who was still crying aloud, said: 'Oh my chaste *Savitri*, do return home to console me in my affliction.'" People came from distant places to behold her and as the raft moved on slowly, they whispered among themselves, 'We have read of *Sita* and *Savitri* in our holy books, but here is one, no less virtuous, whom we are fortunate enough to behold in flesh and blood.'

As the raft drifted away on the stream, Behula felt she was going to that land where there was no death. Sanaka could not be persuaded to leave the banks, where she had fallen on the sand, frenzied with her grief. Behula at last said aloud from the raft: 'Please keep the lamp burning in the bridal chamber so that on my return home with my husband, restored to life, I may see it there.'

BEHULA

Hundreds of mourners—men and women—repeatedly entreated her to return home, all saying that their hearts would break with grief if she refused them. With her eyes wet with tears she replied tenderly: ‘Oh my friends, elders and well-wishers, bless me that my husband may be brought back to life.’

The raft moved on and on, and by and by was out of sight. The news of this tragedy travelled fast and far.

Alone on a raft a young girl had drifted away with a corpse. For a long time after that, no one could describe the scene without being moved to tears, and the Gangoor on which this supreme act of loving devotion had been performed, became to those who lived on its banks, holy as the mother Ganges herself. People gathered dust from its banks—the dust trodden by Behula—and kept it in their temples as sacred, sanctified by sacrifice.

After that terrible day Sanaka lay on her bed scarcely conscious of what was going on around her; Chand had left his home and it was said that he had gone mad and was wandering distracted in the depths of the forests.

VI

BUT Chand had not lost his reason. In this new and heavy trial that had fallen upon him he turned again to his deity; wearing the drab cloth of a Sannyasin with a string of Rudraksha round his neck, he was seeking in communion with his god the strength to bear this calamity. He roamed about the forests of the Sonthali hills and remained absorbed in the contemplation of Siva and soon saw nothing but his god revealed to him far and near in the whole universe. When in the evening the dark clouds were seen hovering about the summits of the lofty hills, they appeared to him as the locks of the great god. In the silvery waters of the Gangoor, flowing down the hills, he saw the holy stream of the Ganges coming out of the divine locks. The sight of the full blown lilies would remind him of the three eyes of Siva. When there was darkness around and the young moon appeared through the dusky mountain tops, how beautiful, thought the merchant, was Siva's face covered with his curling hair, and he would salute the mountain a thousand times as an emblem of the deity he worshipped. At the close of the

night when the mountainous regions were seen deemly lighted by faded stars, he would see in them beads of rosary that adorned the neck of the god and sometimes the white ashes on his divine body. He would recite hymns in his praise and remain absorbed for long in contemplation. At times the low murmurings of the Gangoor would seem to him as the mystic *Omkara* uttered by the great god. Thus whole day and night he remained absorbed in meditation on him.

But his mind was not free from woeful recollections. Every now and then it seemed to him that some one was crying aloud in an agonising voice, 'Where is my Lakshmindra?' and, unable, as if through exhaustion, to say any more, the mourner's voice would sink low till it became inaudible, and then, except for the sound of deep sighs, nothing could be heard. Thus agitated by the creations of his own fancy, the restless merchant-prince would fix his troubled gaze in the direction of his palace and tears would stand on his eyes.

Sometimes his meditation drifted to strange subjects, and he fancied that he saw a girl travelling to regions unknown with the corpse

BEHULA

of him who was his dearest. It took him a moment to recollect who that girl was, and in the next instant his eyes would be seen suffused with tears. When again he recovered himself, he would loudly recite hymns in honour of Siva, the solemn sound of which would cause those mountainous regions to reverberate.

VII

THE news of the calamity had found its way to Nichhaninagar, but it was kept from Saibene and the members of his family. Strange forebodings, however, troubled Amala. She marked with apprehension every little incident which was held to be inauspicious, and thought it was the harbinger of an approaching disaster. She unconsciously shed tears as the question whether any mishap had overtaken her daughter crossed her troubled mind.

Her suspicion was confirmed at last, for she heard some one saying: 'Send your sons to Champaknagar to get information about their sister.' The behest made in a tone of suppressed grief, confirmed her mis-givings, and she sent her sons Harisadhu, Subal and Sriram

BEHULA

forthwith to the city. They took with them various articles of food, dresses and other presents for the merchant of Champaknagar. On their way they were told the terrible story of their dearest sister's cruel fate and the desperate thing she had done.

The brothers were struck dumb by the news, and indeed ere they had travelled far, they saw Behula upon a raft, sitting like a statue and gazing fixedly at her husband's lifeless body. Tossed by the waves, the raft alternately plunged into the water and rose up on the surface, and Behula, pale and emaciated, sat heedless to its movements. The bright mark of luck was still on her forehead, and her wet cloth fluttered in the wind. Alligators rushing from all sides, tried to devour the body, but by waving her hand Behula scared them away.

Harisadhu addressing her in a voice choked with tears said: 'Sister, what is it that has brought you to this condition? It is only two days ago that we sent you to Champaknagar, dressed like a queen; how within such a short time have these terrible things happened to you?' And they cried aloud.

BEHULA

Behula gave no reply, but gently touched her forehead with her hand, implying that all was due to her bad luck, and what she could not say, her tears told with an appeal that moved the brothers more than speech.

Harisadhu said in a tremulous voice : ' No one has any control over one's destiny ; bring the raft to the banks and let us make a pyre of scented wood and burn the body. What is the good of drifting with it on the river ? The heartless merchant has sent the living with the dead down to meet a watery grave. How cruel are the inhabitants of Champaknagar ! We shall never allow you to go there again.'

Behula shook her head. She said : ' If I can ever restore my husband to life, I shall go back, but otherwise his lot and mine are so bound up that they will never be severed.'

The people ashore wept bitterly at this terrible sight. Harisadhu said again : ' Come home, you will be installed there as the guiding angel. You are the darling of our mother—our only sister. Though you are not permitted to wear the shell bracelets of a bride, we shall adorn you in our brotherly love ; in the place

BEHULA

of vermilion, we shall adorn your forehead with scented powder, and if you have to live a life of austere simplicity, it will be our joy to share it with you. Oh sister, see to what a danger you expose yourself! Allegators and sharks may devour you, or as you are so young, and beautiful, some wicked person may do you harm.'

But Behula only replied: 'Brothers, go back. It will not be possible for me to return home as a widow. Please tell our dear mother that I am still with one to whom I have been given and cannot for a moment live apart from him. Put the food you have brought for me under yonder *Champaka* tree, and when my husband is restored to life, it will be partaken of by both of us together. Why, oh dear brothers, are you weeping for me?'

She could speak no more as her eyes were blinded with tears, and slowly the raft moved on till by and by it was out of sight.

Oh, who is drifting there on a raft with the corpse of her husband. We have seen many a consort true to her lord in life, but here, behold one who is true in death! The red mark of luck adorns the forehead of many a

BEHULA

bride, but here see the mark, fresh as that of any young wife, on the forehead of a widow ! The dark still waters of the Gangoor, lit up with the glorious rays of the morning sun, added lustre to the crimson mark and, in the darkness of the night, its waters reflected the radiant stars that lent a mild and angelic brilliance to her form.

Soon after, the raft reached a landing place called Bagerghat ; her husband's body, from which life had long departed, began to decay ; the form whose beauty just lately transported her into the bliss of heaven, was being destroyed by worms. Wherever she noticed a temple on the river banks, she at once got out and worshipped the presiding deity with tears as her only offerings.

At Godaghat a hideous fisherman whose legs were swollen with the disease of the country, and who wore a shell necklace and a pair of earrings, was struck by Behula's rare beauty. He had four wives, all of whom, he assured Behula, fared happily and lived easy lives, and he offered to give her the foremost rank amongst them all if she would only consent to marry him. When

BEHULA

she turned away without even knowing what he had said, he jumped into the water to seize her. Behula cast an indignant look on him, and, caught by the tide, he was carried far away and disappeared under the waters.

Two brothers, Dhona and Mona were sailing on the river in a boat. Both cast looks of desire on the unhappy young widow, and fell to fighting for her; the boat was upset and they were both drowned.

A physician approached Behula and said that he would restore her husband to life; but, as she looked into his eyes and saw them to be burning with unholy desire, she left the place in horror. The thought that people were capable of insulting her, even when in the lowest depths of grief, afflicted her, and she wept as she reflected on the wickedness of men.

Day after day passed. The river now flowed in a southern direction. Behula was constantly busy driving away the creatures that attacked the precious body; but how could she check the decay that had set in causing the flesh to fall off the bones and drop into the river?

Where she was going, Behula had no idea; but she was unconsciously practising that

austere asceticism which invests those who practise it with superhuman powers. She did not know how or in what way her husband would be brought back to life, but in proportion to the severity of her sufferings she felt encouraged by some unknown power to hope on. God alone knew her misery and He would not, nay, could not, she thought, forsake her in the depths of her grief.

Now, however, a fresh danger confronted her. The raft which consisted of a few plantain trees, joined together by bamboo sticks, began to fall to pieces. Behula was in despair. Alas, what would become of her! Not knowing what to do, she embraced the precious relic, all that remained of her beloved husband, as her only support, and prayed to God. Suddenly a noble figure appeared to her mental eye, as though standing before her.

It was Sanaka, her mother-in-law. Though she had seen her only once, she could not forget a face which bore such a striking resemblance to her husband's. Whilst her attention was thus engrossed for a moment, the raft was completely repaired by an unseen hand, and when she feared that she was on the point of

BEHULA

sinking into the water, she suddenly found that her frail craft was mended.

A few days later, the raft came to a landing ghat, where people brought food for Behula. Whilst taking some of it, she asked those who offered it to bless her that she might bring her husband back to life. 'Where is thy husband,' they enquired; and as she pointed to the skeleton, for that was all there was now on the raft with her, they were deeply moved and said with tears in their eyes: 'We all implore the mercy of God whole-heartedly, and pray that He may restore thy dead husband to life.'

After a time the raft came to another landing place called Noadarghat.

People on the banks were charmed with Behula's unearthly beauty, and looked at her again and again as they passed her. They could not understand why such a lovely girl should be drifting on the river with a bleached skeleton by her.

VIII

AFTER six months' drifting, all that remained of Lakshmindra was a few bones, whilst Behula, worn by sufferings, was reduced to a living skeleton. The exquisite and faultless beauty of her person had vanished. 'The flower of fourteen summers,' as she was at the time of her marriage, was now withered. No one, not her own mother even, would have known her now; the sweet and lovely smile that had once played upon her lips, revealing their coral treasure, had disappeared; one beauty remained to her however, and it was in the supernatural and heavenly glow that shone in her countenance, full of mystic light.

After these six months of silent anguish the power of hell was to be loosed upon her, to try her constancy of purpose.

It was evening; and the mighty waves of the river made a dreadful sound, adding terror to the darkness. All the creatures that dwell in the water were darting from the river, whilst on the raft Behula, still as a statue, was guarding the skeleton. The gusts of wind

kept up a fearful concert with the sound of the waves. Behula's ears were now deafened and she did not know where she was, whether on the land or on the water ; she could not say in which direction lay the sky, or the river, or from which quarter the wind blew, and the source from which darkness descended. She was bewildered. There was no moon in the sky, nor stars, nor was there the light on any boat to be seen. Over everything impenetrable darkness was spread, and she felt as if she was being carried on the back of a huge snake, which was hissing appallingly, as it went on with its burden. It was the river leading her fast to where the mockery of demons was to add the last drop to her cup of anguish. No words will ever tell what she felt when, out of the darkness, came a loud and hideous laugh. She then heard jeering voices saying : 'How could the dead come to life again ? Give up your foolish idea and return home ;' then the shrieking horrible laughter came from all sides at once. But she held her husband's skeleton in her close embrace, and the sound died away not to be heard again.

Behula then heard wolves and jackals crying aloud as they said, ' Give up those bones

BEHULA

to us. They will be of no use to you. You are very kind, we know, please do not deprive us of them.' Behula was alarmed and, in order to protect the skeleton from the clutches of beasts, pressed it to her breast and remained firm in an attitude of prayer. The beasts then passed out of sight.

Then a mockery of another kind began ; the clouds opened, unveiling the moon for a little while, and, beyond the clouds, lit up by the moon-beams, she saw a scene of unearthly beauty. A great multitude of men and women were gathered together as if participating in some joyful festivities. The handsomest of all the men called her and said : ' Behula, fie on you ! Leave that loathsome skeleton aside and, after having bathed in perfumed water, dress yourself in rich and gorgeous attire and join us ; the youth of a woman is transient, once lost it is gone for ever like the water that runs in the stream ; let us enjoy life in sweet conversation in the midst of other pleasures.' Behula saw that it was no dream and that the persons whom she beheld were all living beings and their voices were clearly to be heard. With feelings of disdain she shut her

BEHULA

eyes and closed her ears and hugged the skeleton still more tightly as if it alone afforded her a woman's protection, and the scene vanished gradually from her sight.

The bitter cold then made her shiver. The wind added to the inclemency of the weather, and, as it blew upon her half-denuded form, it cut her like a knife. In her suffering she now saw a handsome youth at a little distance, seated on a soft and warm couch and surrounded by every comfort, beckoning her to come to him. Behula shut her eyes again in contempt and, as if to seek comfort from the cold also, embraced the skeleton, and soon the young man was to be seen no more and the severity of the weather was softened.

Next she beheld Amala, her mother, from whom she had now so long been separated, and saw how wasted her form had become, and how she was covered with dust from head to foot ; she said : ' Behula, come, my darling, if only to see the sad condition of thy father.' Her poor bereaved mother's condition excited the pity of all. If she chanced to see any raft upon the water of the Gangoor, she would run after it like a mad woman. She would also throw herself

BEHULA

at the feet of all coming from Champaknagar, begging them earnestly to tell her if they had anything to communicate to her about Behula. Every now and then she cried aloud : ' Oh my darling ! come back to my embrace.' Fasting had wasted her once fair form. How indeed could that unfortunate mother of a girl, for whom the whole world seemed to be in mourning, bear the pangs of separation from her ? ' Come home, my darling, you are the queen of my house,' sobbed she again and again and said . ' Who has ever restored life to the dead ? Oh, I am dying for thee—save me from the jaws of death,' and then she seemed to come up to touch her. Tears ran down Behula's cheeks and she replied softly yet firmly : ' Oh mother, I will not go back, for I cannot suffer myself to ' and embracing the skeleton she began to sob in anguish of spirit. Amala then disappeared from her sight as the others had done.

Behula addressed the goddess and said : ' Oh mother, where art thou ? Do help thy helpless child. Lo, how wasted and feeble I have become ! I have no more strength left in me, and I am no longer able to protect the remains of my dear husband ; my clothes have been torn to shreds

and blown away, and are quite insufficient to save me from shame. I have endured every sorrow, who else is there to help me, if thou dost not! My strength has failed, Oh goddess, it is thy aid that I seek for my protection.'

Her prayer was heard, and now her trials were drawing to their end; for, soon after she had uttered her prayer in that strain, the whole horizon lit up with dazzling brilliance and an unseen hand presented her with a jar of nectar, the touch of which gave her back her lost beauty, and made her tattered clothes new. Her heart was now filled with indomitable courage. Now she knew that her husband would be brought back to life, though how or in what way, she knew not yet.

All on a sudden she saw in her mental vision the scenes of her past lives appearing in perfect clearness. She saw that in her seven previous lives she had become a widow on her marriage night, and had burnt herself on her husband's funeral pyre. The great sacrifices made in those past lives endowed her with extraordinary virtues, so that in her present life she could keep firmly to her resolve to win back her husband's departed soul.

IX

THE first person Behula saw in the world of hope into which she seemed now to have entered was a washer-woman of the name of Neta who was washing clothes at a *ghât* towards which the raft was slowly moving. Her mystic powers told her plainly that Neta was not a human being, though she appeared to be one. There was something in her look, words, and deeds which convinced Behula that she was an angel disguised in the human form in which she appeared; she knew that the washer-woman belonged to a land where death was unknown, and thither she wished to go to get back her husband's life. She felt an unaccountable relief as the conviction came upon her that the strange person was the one who could help her to reach that land. Throughout the whole day she watched Neta closely but the heavenly washer-woman seemed to take no notice of her. Neta's little son was with her as she worked, and when he disturbed her she stifled him and laid his lifeless body by the side of the wooden board on which she was beating her clothes.

BEHULA

Not for a moment did she pay any attention to the lifeless child, but went on doing her work. At the close of the day all that she did was to sprinkle a few drops of water on the dead child to bring him back to life and set his little face aglow with smiles again.

The heavenly washer-woman now began to ascend upwards, with the washed clothes on her head, leading her boy by the hand. In a moment she disappeared on her aerial path.

Behula passed a sleepless night trying to understand the meaning of what she had seen.

Next morning the strange woman came to the *ghât* again, and did the same thing to her boy, and when in the evening, after finishing her work, she was on the point of starting for her celestial home with the milk-white clothes placed on her head, taking her little son, restored to life, by the hand, Behula threw herself at her feet and bathed them with her tears.

Turning to her, Neta said with a meaning smile: 'I have never come across anyone so tenacious as you. Well, if you wish to get back your husband's life come with me to

BEHULA

heaven ; there Siva, the great god, is fortunately predisposed in your favour.'

Behula had hardly hoped for so prompt an answer to her prayer, and her heart leapt with joy ; tears of gratitude moistened her cheeks. Neta graciously and lovingly wiped away her tears and spoke to her in a kind and affectionate manner as if she had known her all her life. Her kindness moved Behula deeply, and each tear she shed told a tale of the unspeakable sufferings she had endured.

Neta led Behula to the court of gods where Indra—the king of the immortals—was seated, with a crown, as bright as the sun, placed on his head, and with garlands of fresh heavenly flowers round his neck. His thousand eyes were at once fixed on Behula as soon as she made her appearance in the court. Above Indra's throne was a chariot with the insignia of a gander, occupied by the four-headed god Brahma—the creator. He was a flash of dazzling red and looked like a sage ; his cloth, his scarf, the garlands of precious stones that he wore, and even his very complexion were all of a scarlet hue. He cast a curious look at Behula with his eight eyes. Higher up in the

Kailasa, under the charge of Kuvera, was the treasure-palace, every hall of which was filled to its utmost capacity, with the rarest gems of the universe, where with a golden vessel in her hand, Annapurna, the consort of Siva, was ever ready to distribute food, sweet as nectar, to all who were hungry. Its master Siva, however, had no concern with precious stones and gold, nor with glittering palaces, as he lived on the cremation grounds, with his body covered with ashes he picked up there, taking no heed of anything temporal or fleeting. Owing to his indifference to all splendour, Vishnu, the greatest of the Trinity, took Siva as his friend, philosopher, and guide. All other gods sought the favour of Vishnu who, himself sought the favour of Siva. The flash of fire emanating from the third eye of Siva became mild as it fell benignly on the countenance of Behula, who was struck with wonder at the sight of the dazzling beauty of the divine beings. Behula, among the gods about whom she had heard so much, and whom she now saw at last, made a respectful obeisance and stood in a suppliant posture before them. The gods then addressed her and said: 'We

are well pleased with you for what you have done. Your attachment to your husband and the sacrifices you have made for him, have won our admiration, and we shall grant the boon you desire; but as you are a reputed dancer, show us first your art.'

Behula had, during all these months, suffered as few had ever suffered before, and now at the moment when she was told that her beloved husband was to be restored to her as a reward for all these sufferings, she received the cruel command to dance first before she could see him alive again! But it was nevertheless a command from the gods and so not to be disobeyed. Without betraying her disappointment she began to dance.

As she danced, each step expressed indescribable pathos. Her gestures, like the wailing notes of a lyre, gave an expression to the agony of her suspense, which drew forth tears from the divine spectators. The sweetness of her smile, saddened by the trials she had gone through, excited the same feeling of pity in their hearts. The dancing of *Rambha*, *Tilottama*, *Menaka*, *Urvasi*, and other heavenly nymphs was not to be compared with Behula's. Theirs

BEHULA

was dazzling and splendid, but could give only transient delight, whilst Behula's was altogether different; it stirred the soul, and had an elevating influence even on her divine spectators.

The gods at last said: 'Oh faithful Behula, your trial is now complete. You have endured what few can endure, and have retained faith in our power to do what you wish. Our cruel order, requiring you to dance, was another ordeal, which also you have passed. Who else could dance in that way, having gone through such sorrows? You shall not have to wait longer.'

The presence of the Queen of Snakes was now demanded in the divine court. She had already promised the gods that she would restore Lakshmindra to life. Neta had heard this, and had assured Behula of it. Would the goddess now break her promise? The *Dikpalas*² began to seek the goddess. The Moon's sight failed her in day time, and even at night her

Presiding lords of the ten directions, viz, East, South-East, South, South-west, West, North-west, North, North-east, the space above and below. The names of the lords are Indra, Bahni, Yama, Nairit, Varuna, Vayu, Kuvera, Isana, Brahma, and Ananta.

BEHULA

eyes could not penetrate the nooks and corners of the universe. The Sun searched for her during the day but in the night became blind. None succeeded in furnishing a clue as to the whereabouts of the goddess. Colour fled from Behula's cheeks, as pale as death she heaved a deep sigh. Siva was now moved to compassion, and asked Neta to take a pinch of the sacred dust with which his body was covered, and after painting her eyes with it, she at once found out Manasa Devi, and led her to the court. The Moon, the God of Winds and the God of Water, all joined together to entreat the goddess to restore Lakshmindra to life. Behula stood there as in a trance, waiting for the realization of the promise made to her by the gods.

Manasa Devi now began to give an explanation of her conduct to the gods present. 'It was necessary,' she said, 'that I should punish Chand. He was openly hostile to me. Sanaka used to worship me privately, but when he came to know of it, he entered the temple and broke my image with strokes of his *hintal* stick. He publicly denounced my worship in the city of Champaka. He gave

me mortal chase when his garden palace, the *Guabari*, was destroyed by my snakes, and tried to demolish my image worshipped by his friend Chandraketu. He at first treated me with contempt in the pride of his friendship of Sankara Garuri, the physician. But his pride was not in the least curbed after the death of his friend. When his ships were on the verge of being upset by a tempest in the Kalidaha, I offered to help him in his danger, but he refused to accept my help, saying that he could not think of defiling his hand, with which he made offerings to Siva, by paying homage to the serpent goddess. On my assuring him that I would rescue him if he would worship me even with his left hand, which he did not use in the worship of Siva, I received only a haughty refusal. The greater the danger, the more bitter became his hatred. No gods amongst the bright ones, present in the pantheon of the celestials of this court would tolerate such overweening pride from a mortal. But out of great forbearance I have not punished him as he deserved. I would even have ceased to notice his insulting behaviour had not the great god ordained that

BEHULA

Chand should worship me first, before I should receive permanent homage from the mortals.'

The goddess looked at Siva sadly, and her face showed the humiliation she felt, and a tear stood in her eye.

The great god consoled her, and asked her to return life to the dead body of Lakshmindra, assuring her that he would bring about a desirable change in the spirit of the merchant, his father.

Manasa Devi was delighted at this, and by the exercise of her powers, Lakshmindra was brought back to life. A sheat fish had swallowed one of Lakshmindra's bones, which was found, only after a long search. At length, however, all difficulties were overcome and Lakshmindra, the bridegroom, stood once more by the side of his bride, in the full glory of a new existence with the blessings of the united celestials resting upon him.

Then, addressing Behula, the goddess said: 'I have been pleased with you, Behula, for your great devotion. Say what further boon you want me to grant you.' Behula said with folded palms: 'Through your grace, divine mother, I am once more happy,

but in our home six widows mourn the loss of their husbands; these unfortunate women neither wear shell-bracelets, nor have they the lucky red marks; they live like ascetics; how difficult and painful it will be for me to taste happiness side by side with my six sisters-in-law, all in mourning; pray goddess, restore my husband's six brothers to life.'

Sridhara, Chand's eldest son, who was supervising the granary when a snake from the garden hard by bit him, now stood before them alive again. His next brother Srikara, who was bitten by a snake when dismounting from horse-back, appeared immediately after; the third brother Gunakara, who met with a similar fate while hunting in a forest and then Sristidhara, the fourth, who was bitten when travelling on board a ship, and then the fifth Hiradhara who was bitten as he was entering the inner apartments of the palace, and, with him, the youngest Durgabara who met his fate when playing with his playmates, followed them, almost together. Manasa Devi took their lives away, but now at the request of Behula they received them back. Also by her power the ships which

BEHULA

were lost in the Kalidaha became fourteen in number instead of seven. The ships *Gangaprasad*, the favour of the Ganges, *Sagarphena*, the sea-foam, *Hansaraba*, the sound of the geese, *Rajaballabha*, the king's favourite and others, all of which were heavy laden with rich cargo when sunk, now floated up on the surface of the heavenly river *Mandakini* and awaited the command of Lakshmindra. The biggest and the most beautiful of them the *Madhukara*, when raised up, looked like a palatial city, fresh after rain-fall.

Behula respectfully saluted the gods before taking her departure ; but Manasa Devi now whispered in her ears : ' If your father-in-law does not worship me this time, I shall take away everything that I have given to you.' Behula's heart trembled in fear, but soon after she felt relieved, remembering the assurance of the great god.

X

BEHULA now started home with her husband in one ship, the brothers following in the others. The fragrant petals of the *Ketaki* flowers, blown by the wind, gently touched the

BEHULA

re-united lovers, as if giving them their warm welcome. All the misery and terror of the upward journey on the raft was now forgotten in the joy of the return homeward with her husband restored to life. One evening, thinking of the terrible moment when death had taken her husband from her, Behula remembered how, in his agony his eyes had turned lovingly towards her, as though he had something to say to her, when death silenced him, and asked him if he remembered what it was he had wished to say.

‘Your eyes called me to you and I placed my ear to your lips, but you could not speak ; death then fixed your gaze also, but, by a supreme effort, you seemed to free yourself for a moment and looked at me again, conveying the message of your infinite love and soon after you passed away engraving the message on my heart. Then I felt that to throw myself on your burning funeral pyre would not satisfy me, and I resolved to go through still greater austerities to bring you back to life.’ As she spoke of these things, Behula, generally so bright, fell to sobbing, and her distressed husband led her thoughts away to happier

things; 'Look,' he said, 'how the herdsmen are blowing horns, and hundreds of persons are bathing in the river Triveni, and are gazing in wonder at our ships.'

The ships speedily reached Narikeldanga, where there was a temple to Manasa Devi. The couple, in great piety, offered worship to the goddess, and again set sail and arrived at Jagooli. On their way down the river, when they passed the places with which some incident of the terrible journey on the raft was associated, Behula told her husband about it, and made his heart overflow with the thought of her unequalled love. When they came to Godaghat, where the fisherman had been drowned, Behula, by her mystic powers, brought him to the surface alive again and he swam across the river to her and expressed his deep gratitude, repenting for his conduct.

Gangpur, Burdwan, Govindapur, and Jubrajpur were passed in succession, and the blissful journey home had come near its end; for, they were now at Champatola where her brothers had brought food for her and begged her to go back to Nichhaninagar. With tears in her eyes, Behula told her husband the story

connected with this place, and requested him to dig up the food from under the earth, which she knew would be found still fresh by the grace of the gods. Her longing to taste the food, brought from the home of her happy childhood, pleased her husband, who did as she wished, and they found delicious food, as fresh as when it had come from her mother's hands, carefully stored there for them. She served it to her husband and her brothers-in-law, and took a portion herself. They then left Champatola and approached Nichhaninagar and she implored her husband to allow her to pay a short visit to her father's home. 'As you desire,' her husband replied, 'but let us go together in disguise.' She was delighted at the idea, and, putting on an ochre-coloured cloth, covered herself with ashes and wore a pair of shell-earrings, like a *Yogini*, and Lakshmindra followed her in the guise of an ascetic.

The inhabitants of Nichhaninagar whispered to one another: 'We have never seen such a beautiful pair, among the ascetics; indeed they look like Siva and his consort.'

The couple left Baruipara behind and reached Saibene's palace. When Behula saw

her father's home once more she wept in deep emotion. As she was stepping across the threshold of the house, she saw her mother coming from the kitchen holding a golden plate of cooked rice in her hand. When Amala saw the couple she cried aloud in a tone that trembled with emotion, and the plate fell from her hand. 'This girl,' she exclaimed, 'looks just like my Behula.' 'My child,' she said, addressing the disguised girl, 'my only daughter, maddened with grief for the loss of her husband, has gone away on a raft to an unknown shore, with his dead body, hoping to bring it back to life. The birds that fly in the air, and the beasts that graze on the meadows, seem all to be in mourning for her ; the horses and elephants feel grief too, for when Behula's name is mentioned they stop eating their food. In the wide world there is none so miserable as I am. Whoever you may be, you remind me of my dear child, and I will not let you go.' So saying Amala embraced her and swooned away overwhelmed by her feelings.

Behula's tears now flowed fast and Lakshmindra himself, standing at a distance, wept with them.

When Amala came to herself again, Behula took her head on her lap, and they wept as much from the joy at meeting again as from the recollection of the sorrows they had passed through. She then gently said to her : ‘Dry your tears, dear mother, see I am your once unfortunate daughter, and yonder is your son-in-law.’ Then the mother and daughter were locked in rapturous embrace, in the ecstasy of which all the sorrows were forgotten.

The people of Nichhaninagar crowded into Saibene’s palace ; the young wives of the neighbourhood, who had gone there to witness the wonderful thing, bowed to Behula in token of their profound respect for her.

After the first great joy of reunion, Behula softly disengaged herself from her mother’s embrace and said : ‘Permit us, dear mother, to take our departure. We must go to my father and mother-in-law.’ But the disappointed mother said in an appealing tone : ‘The goddess *Durga* stays for three days in a year with her parents. Will you be so cruel as to leave us after a short greeting only?’ But Behula replied, ‘You, dear mother, have been mourning the loss of a daughter, whereas my

mother-in-law sorrows for the loss of her seven sons and myself; let me take them back to her.'

The couple then left Nichhaninagar, disguised as they had come, and the people of the palace gave them a silent farewell, but bitterly disappointed at their early departure.

At last they reached Champaknagar and the fourteen beautiful ships dropped their anchors at the old anchorage. Behula now disguised herself as a *Domini*.^{*} She had employed the divine artist Viswakarma to make for her a fan of wonderful design, on which gold threads and stones were woven and inlaid so as to give pictures of all the members of her father-in-law's family. She now came from the ship with the fan in her hand.

That day Chand was engaged in performing the half-yearly *Sradh* † ceremony for his son Lakshmindra. According to the custom, the six widowed daughters-in-law went to the Gangoor to bring water for the

A low caste woman who sells cane-baskets and fans.

† A funeral ceremony performed by the Hindus once in every six months for the welfare of the spirit of one who is dead.

BEHULA

ceremony, and as they saw the beautiful *Domini* with the fan in her hand, they asked her how she came to possess so valuable a thing, and what she would do with it? 'I shall sell it for a lac of rupees,' was her terse reply. When the ladies examined the fan, they were astonished to find on it the portraits of all the members of their family. On being asked who she was, Behula replied, keeping up her pretence: 'My name is Behula Domini, my father's name is Saidome, my father-in-law's is Chandome, and my husband's is Lakshmidome.' At the mention of these familiar names, though followed by an unfamiliar surname, painful recollections came to the minds of the widows, and, leaving the supposed *Domini* on the river-banks alone, they returned home and told the story to their mother-in-law. Sanaka had at once a premonition of something wonderful about to happen, and guided by an inward impulse rushed to the bridal chamber. There, to her great surprise, she saw that the golden lamp, lit by her daughter-in-law on her marriage night, was still burning. Her hopes now ran high, and she hastened to the river-banks, and as soon as she saw the disguised girl with

the fan in her hand she fell unconscious as Behula's mother had done. When she recovered she saw Behula before her, but yet so changed after the terrible and wonderful experiences she had gone through, that she was entreating her to tell her if she really was the same. Thereupon Behula said again : ' We are *Dome* by caste and we earn our living by selling wicker-baskets ' But the beautiful face of the supposed *Domini* was unmistakable ; it was that sweet face she had known for a short time only, but which left upon her such an indelible impression, and, torn with emotion, she cried aloud.

The pretended *Domini* then took her mother-in-law by the hand and said : ' Weep no more, mother, see your sons have all been restored to life.'

Immediately, then, the seven sons appeared before their mother and bowed respectfully to her. No words will ever describe the feelings of the six widows 'who had followed their mother-in-law to the banks of the river when they beheld this wonderful thing that had been accomplished. In an instant they found they were widows no longer, and that their foreheads were adorned with the lucky red marks and their arms with

BEHULA

shell-bracelets, beautifully inlaid with gold, all by an unseen hand.

But Behula then said: 'It has been ordained that we shall not enter the city of Champaka unless my father-in-law worships Manasa Devi; my disguise is but a contrivance to bring you hither to me.'

XI

CHAND Sadagar, who went to the Sonthali hills as soon as the report of the arrival of his sons and Behula reached him, was now addressing his god in the following strain :

"O mighty god—the blue-throated one—when, on the occasion of the churning of the ocean,* the gods carried away *Amrita*, the

* The Churning of the Ocean is described as follows :

The sage Durvasa offered a garland of heavenly flowers to the god Indra, who hung it on the tusks of his great elephant; this angered the sage, who cursed Indra thus: 'May you, O god, lose Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity.' That goddess, as soon as the curse was uttered, plunged into the ocean, and heaven lost all happiness and charm. The *Devas*, propitiating the god Vishnu, one of the trinity, churned the ocean in co-operation with the *Asuras* (demons). The goddess came forth from the depths of the sea, to the delight of the immortals, and as a result of the churning many rare and valuable things sprang from the ocean which the gods divided amongst themselves.

nectar, *Lakshmi*, the goddess of fortune, *Uchchaisrava*, the high-necked steed, *Parijata*, the heavenly flower-plant, *Airavata*, the great elephant, and many things of great value which had arisen from the deep—thou hadst no share in the prizes ; but when deadly poison began to arise from the depths of the sea, threatening the whole universe with destruction, the gods fled away in terror and begged thee to save the world ; thou wert moved to compassion and didst at once come forward to help, and saved the world by drinking the poison, the blue marks of which on thy throat tell the tale of thy noble heroism.

‘ When Sumanta, the sage, addressed the goddess Ganga and said :—‘ Once at a banquet in heaven, whilst serving food to the gods, some of them looked with lust on the charms

But there was a second churning, with another history, at which many more rare things were expected to come, but only a flood of deadly poison came, threatening to destroy the world. The great god Siva, who had not been called in to take a share of the prizes, was prayed to by the distressed immortals to come to the rescue at this juncture, and he came and drank the poison, thereby saving the universe from impending destruction.

There are also other reasons given for this joint enterprise of the gods and demons, which need not be mentioned here.

BEHULA

of thy person, thou art, therefore, fallen from the heavenly order and I can no longer keep thee in my hermitage,' and the goddess, forsaken by the sage, was refused any shelter in the whole universe and when the gods dared not extend their hospitality to her for fear of calumny, thou then, in thy infinite mercy and kindness, fearless of everything, took her up on thy head,* and the gods have ever admired thee for this noble act.

'O! the blue-throated one, thou hast discarded everything that people hold sacred and beneficial, taking delight in the dust of the cremation ground, considered unholy by all; Kuvera, the god of wealth, is thy appointed treasurer, but throughout all these ages

* The conception of Siva with the River Ganges (Ganga) flowing down from beneath his locks is found in some of the Puranas.

Presumably the grave and sombre-looking mountains—the Himalayas—suggested the idea of a great ascetic absorbed in eternal Yoga. The crescent moon peeping over their snowy brow and their declivities suggesting the ascetic's matted locks, hanging down his shoulders, and the streams of water pouring down from their innumerable crevices, supplied materials to the Indian poets of old for the conception of the great god in this form. If this explanation is correct, one can easily understand the rest and the creation of any legend like the one we see in Behula.

thou hast never cared to seek his help for material objects. What a contrast do thy savage attendants, Nandi and Bhiringi, offer to the splendid retenue of other gods; what a contrast does thy favourite flower—the poisonous *Dhustara*—offer to the heavenly flower, the *Parijata*, chosen by other gods. Thou lovest the lowly and the neglected ones; the savages are thy companions, for thou hatest none, and when they dance in wild ecstasy around thee, thou seemest to be absorbed in the vision beatific—which is vouchsafed to no other god to see. When at the end of the appointed periods the universe is destroyed, the perfect calm of thy soul is not disturbed and the great and solemn sound of *Omkara* resounds through thy horn, proclaiming that the destruction of the temporal cannot disturb the everlasting, which does not decay. All passions of the flesh have been destroyed by the fire of thy divine eyes, and in thy soul there is perfect calm, perfect love, and perfect compassion for the suffering world. These thy virtues have been gained by thy austere self-abnegation and *Yoga*. When thy eye-lids are closed in *Yoga*, and thou art absorbed in *Samadhi*, suspending thy

breath, 'ages pass by and many an Indra and many a Brahma, lesser deities, rise and fall. Among the fleeting and ephemeral thou remainest as the one immutable truth in thy blissful state of *Samadhi*.

Then Chand said: 'Though a mortal man, I feel, nevertheless, that I am a part of the infinite—thy great self. Insignificant being though I am, I feel that no one has any claim on my soul; I have no father, no mother, no beginning and no end; the eight quarters from which the winds of heaven blow, and the space above and beneath me are my raiment, as they are of thee, known as the *Digambara*, and even amidst destruction I am ever existent—though I may be nowhere in the visible world; I also am a perennial joy, the truth personified.'

As Chand contemplated the mystic power of the soul he recited the following *sloka* :—

Neither enmity have I, nor anger,
From greed and illusion I am free,
To pride and envy I am a stranger,
No Religion have I, no salvation,
No wealth, no passion,
But knowlege absolute, joy absolute,
I am He, I am He.

BEHULA

I have no virtue, no sin,
No pleasure, no sorrow,
No hymn am I, no shrine,
Nothing knowable, no sacrifice,
I do not eat, nor food am I, nor eater,
But knowledge absolute, joy absolute,
I am He, I am He.
No death have I, nor fear
Nor have I distinction of caste,
I have no father, no mother, no birth,
Neither friend, preceptor, nor disciple,
But knowledge absolute, joy absolute,
I am He, I am He.'

With his eyes half-closed in meditation, Chand tried to overcome his feelings and free his mind from all worldly longings ; still he could not repress his joy at the news of the return of his sons and Behula to Champaknagar, though he knew already that unless he offered *pūja* to Manasa Devi they would all depart. 'What would be,' he thought, 'the condition of my poor wife, should that happen ?' And he became pensive. The more he tried to hold fast to the spirit of renunciation, the more his growing apprehensions weakened the foundation of his lofty ideals.

Just then, his dream was interrupted, his eyes were attracted to an old man who, seated on a branch high up in a tree close by, was striking at it with an axe; Chand thought that the man must have parted with his senses.

‘Halloa, what are you doing up there?’ Cried the merchant, ‘Have you gone crazy? See, you are cutting the branch you are seated upon. Are you trying to kill yourself?’

The old man made no direct reply but only quoted the words—‘No death, no fear.’ Chand was filled with wonder, for he had himself uttered these words just a few minutes before.

Had this old man been listening to him?

Chand’s perplexities did not escape the old man who said: ‘You call me mad? But is there any one more insane than you are? Why have you ruined your own family by conducting a futile quarrel with the Queen of Snakes?’

‘It is a long story, my friend, and you would not be able to understand it,’ replied the merchant. At this the old man laughed and said: ‘Just now you declared yourself to be an exalted being, and thought you had “no

enmity nor anger," and that from "greed and illusion" you were free. Do you think, my friend, that in keeping up the dispute with the goddess you are acting in accordance with those lofty principles? Just answer me now. Do not consider the decrepit and grey-haired old man to be beneath your notice. You yourself have just now said—"To pride and envy a stranger I am".'

Chand now looked upon the old man as a *sannyasin*, and replied: 'Pardon me, sir, for my thoughtlessness. You seem to be a wise man. Let me give you the explanation you wish to have from me. I do not worship gods who use their powers to make or mar people's worldly prosperity. It is not wantonly that I have made Manasa Devi my enemy but because I do not require her help as I am not a seeker of fortune, nor am I afraid of worldly sorrows. My garden, the *Gaubari*, was first destroyed, then I lost my seven sons and finally my valuable property, but am still unmoved. All the wealth of the world, taken together, seems insignificant to me and that is why I have not cared for Manasa. All the venom that may be at her

BEHULA

command can strike no fear in me ; that is why I have disregarded her. The tide of happiness and misfortune is nothing but illusive. I am seeking for permanent bliss. I am not the man to offer *pujas* to the gods and pray to them for worldly gain, as women do. My desire for earthly happiness has been fully satisfied, and I am not afraid of sorrows or earthly losses of any kind. Old man ! You seem not to be aware of the strength of my mind, and have misjudged me in thinking that it is out of spite that I do not worship Manasa.

‘Why again should this goddess thrust herself in my way ? Why is she eager for me to worship her against my wish ? I am not a suppliant for anything that may be granted by her as a favour, nor am I anxious to retain anything that may be destroyed by her. My god occupies a much higher place and I know how great he is. I have forbidden to my family the worship of this dispenser of worldly happiness and misfortune.’

The old man replied : ‘It is self-deception. You have not yet risen to that elevation where one does not feel elated by happiness

or depressed by sorrows. Just a few minutes ago your heart was being violently agitated by the news of the return of Lakshmindra and Behula.'

Chand was astounded and fixed his gaze on the old man in wonder. This man, thought he, is surely not an ordinary mortal. He has acquired an extraordinary power by religious practices; how else could he read my thoughts? He said: 'Living in the world, like the sage Janaka, I try to keep myself **above** worldliness. It is inevitable that a mortal should be susceptible at times to worldly pain and pleasure, but a true man must strive to be indifferent to them.'

The old man replied: 'But you have not, my friend, been able to be a Janaka. Never did that royal sage become overwhelmed with worldly grief or joy. When his capital Mithila was burnt to ashes, Sukadeva, the sage, was surprised to see him peacefully sitting on the banks of a neighbouring river and said to him—"Oh king, do you not see that your capital is being destroyed?" To this the monarch replied calmly—"Nothing that is *mine* is being destroyed." Now you, have you been able to face your disasters in such a dispassionate

manner? Even at this moment when uttering *slokas* in the praise of Siva, how often did deep sighs come from your lips, and how often were your floral dedications, offered to the god, desecrated by your tears? Certainly the god did not accept them thus; you pay him but lip service, and have only a superficial idea of the meaning of the *sloka* you recite. All self-sacrifice comes naturally to those who have rightly understood its meaning and no worldly prosperity has any attraction to them. Though Siva is your god, you have tried to break the worldly ties without help from him. By this you have only strengthened these ties. Manasa Devi would never have wanted you to worship her had you not drawn her to you by your worldliness. Presumption and thoughts of pride bring upon man his misfortune, and you are blaming Manasa Devi unjustly. Your foolish self-conceit is responsible alone for what you have suffered. Pay homage to Manasa Devi as a manifestation of Siva's power in the world, and you will be free from her influence once and for all. You think now that you have found atonement when you are but your unregenerated self.'

As the merchant listened to the old man he seemed to hear the music of a thousand harps. He now clearly understood that he would not be able to disentangle himself from worldly ties by confidence in his own powers, but only through the grace of God. This gave relief to his aching heart. Involuntarily his palms were joined together, tears came profusely into his eyes and flowed in torrents down his cheeks, and, like one under a spell, he knelt down and looked at the old man submissively and with great respect.

To his utter amazement he found that the old man was no longer there, and in his place was the great god Siva himself, with his matted hair, with his body painted with ashes, with bracelets and a necklace made of the coils of living snakes, and with a diadem of serpents adorning his head. The rippling of the river Ganges under his matted locks of hair was as though an emblem of the perennial joy that welled up within his soul.

Chand saw that the three eyes of the great god were beaming with divine omniscience, and his body was not temporal but made of the essence of all the virtues, in which anger,

BEHULA

enmity, pride, arrogance, and other vices had no place. The merchant at once realised how small a being he himself was. The ashes of the cremation ground which adorned the person of Siva seemed to him to have consumed the pleasures of the world and awakened a perennial joy, whereas the dust on his own person symbolised nothing but his sinfulness.

Chand felt that the poisonous *Dhustara* flowers which the great god wore in his ears were diffusing a divine fragrance, the like of which he had never before known. The white petals of the flowers seemed to him in their beauty to surpass those of all other flowers of the world. It seemed to the merchant that even the hissing sound of the awe-inspiring snakes which surrounded Siva within their slimy folds, was a source of the god's constant spiritual joy. He saw that the poison, drunk by the god for the benefit of the universe, had left a line of sparkling blue on his throat, and that the same poison, in the shape of serpents, covered his person, and lent a peculiar brilliance to the flowers which adorned his ears. The light of the nectar which arose from the churning of

BEHULA

the poison-ocean was displayed in the beautiful lips of the great god. His glance, which was beaming with love and joy, made the whole world share in the glory of Kailasa, his abode, binding everywhere the lion and the lamb in ties of affection.

The universe now appeared to the merchant as an emblem of the deity whose resplendence made it shine ; the clouds, brightened by the rays of the sun, seemed to him like the dazzling matted hair of Siva's head, and the ashes with which his sacred person was covered, to emblemise the transitoriness of the world's glory, emphasising that which is imperishable and everlasting. The murmur of the holy stream beneath the matted locks of hair of the great god seemed to proclaim the happy tidings of the spiritual world.

The merchant knelt down again with folded palms before the god and heard him say : ' Know you henceforth that Manasa Devi is my daughter ; you have told her that you will not offer *pujas* to her with your right hand ; worship her with your left, if you wish.' Then as a flash of lightning the adorable figure of the mighty god disappeared.

BEHULA

For a long time after Chand sobbed aloud and at last said : ‘ Oh god, I will humble myself to the dust, I will bend my head to the ground when offering *pujas* to thy daughter, Manasa Devi.’

XII

BY and by Chand, now a changed man, began to long for the society of his wife and children. On the banks of the Gangoor he saw great crowds of people and Sanaka weeping, reclining in the arms of Behula, while all her sons remained standing near her.

When he approached this wonderful family gathering, Behula threw herself at his feet, amidst a murmur of astonished admiration from the spectators.

The merchant could hardly believe his own eyes when he noticed on his daughter-in-law the marks that distinguished the great god himself. In the divine loveliness of her appearance, in the spirit of her self-sacrifice, in her tears, in her voice, and in her every movement he found reflection as if it was of the great god’s piety ;

it was all the more striking to him as he had a short while before seen before him his divine self as a living personality.

Behula then rose up, and, addressing her father-in-law with tears in her eyes, said : ' Father, are you so cruel as to wish us to go away never to return ? It is through unheard-of difficulties that we have come back to you ; without the help of Manasa Devi it could never have been accomplished, and if we do not pay homage to her we shall not be able to remain. Pray, do not be cruel to your children.'

The whole crowd waited in painful suspense for the merchant's reply. Like a deer, struck with an arrow, Sanaka remained breathless in expectation of her husband's answer, on which it seemed her very existence depended, and her sons, with downcast eyes, were sobbing.

Chand kept silence for a short while, after which he tried to speak, but his voice was choked with emotion. Controlling his feelings with a mighty effort he said to Behula : ' Oh my spiritual mother, so long I have never worshipped Siva but only the goddess of pride. It is in fact you who have worshipped the great god, and his divinity I now see reflected in your person.

Announce it to all that Chand will atone for his past sins ; he will ere long feel himself blessed in offering homage to Manasa Devi, whom he now knows to be the daughter of the great god.'

XIII

A BEAUTIFUL temple was built with a roof supported by great crystal pillars, all the projected eaves of which were decorated with pendants of diamonds and other jewels of different sizes and colours ; a row of golden lamps, diffusing light to these pendants, made them shine and scintillate. A golden image of the goddess Manasa was made, and, on an auspicious day, in the month of *Sravana*, Chand had everything prepared for her worship.

The family priest Janardan, when making preparation for the *puja*, wondered why the goddess did not seem to grace the temple by her presence, although he had already recited *mantras* praying for that favour from her.

Chand also was surprised at this, but, looking up, he saw that the goddess, clad in a

BEHULA

scarlet coloured *sari*, embroidered with gold, was in her celestial chariot, with the insignia of the duck on its flag and that, as though unable for some mysterious reason to descend to the new temple, created for her, she hovered above in the sky. Behula enquired of the goddess why she hesitated, and was told that she feared the mystic wand which the merchant-prince had still in his hand. She then asked her father-in-law, with due respect, to throw away his *hintal* stick. Thereupon the merchant replied that the goddess was no longer to fear the stick, which he at once threw into the fire and used the charcoal to burn incense in the temple on the occasion. Afterwards he solemnised the worship with the zeal and earnestness of a true devotee.

Manasa Devi was pleased with Chand and offered to grant him any boon that he might ask of her. Though he wanted no worldly gifts he had now no hesitation in praying to the goddess for the life of his devoted friend, Sankar Garuri, who met with an untimely death in his endeavours to help him.

Through the grace of Manasa Devi, Sankar got back his life, and for many days, festivities

went on joyously at the merchant's palace; friends from far and near came to greet him on the happy occasion.

But after a few days discord arose. Nilambar Banik, a relation of Chand, whose pride for his high pedigree was great, turned his head haughtily towards him and said: 'God knows, how Lakshmindra has been brought back to life, but the fact remains that his young wife has lived away from her home for six months, how and where we do not know. We, therefore, take objection to your giving her a place in your home until all mystery in connection with the matter is cleared up.'

Janardan Ray, a resident of Nabakhanda, who also prided himself on his orthodoxy, said: 'Nilambar is right. It will be a scandalous thing if Chand allows a girl in connection with whom there is a mystery to dwell in his house.' But Dhusa Datta, a resident of Burdwan, protested vehemently and said: 'The whole community of our caste has been glorified by this virtuous girl, and we are not prepared to listen to such remarks as these in connection with her.' Nilambar and Dhusa Datta waxed

not in discussing the matter and the bigots seemed gradually to be making their ideas prevail. Dhusa Datta, trembling with rage, left the assembly and the danger of a brawl led by Harisadhu, the eldest son of Sai on the one hand, and Ram Ray, a brother-in-law of Nilambar on the other, became imminent.

But most of the merchant's kinsmen, assembled there, bent their heads low in shame at this base remark, and many of them shed tears in sympathy for Behula.

To quell the disturbance Chandi Prasad Sadagar addressed the assembly and said : ' Let us rather test the fidelity of Behula in the three following ways :

' Firstly, let her be thrown into a room, built of combustible materials to which we shall set fire. Ramchandra, a son of Dasaratha, king of Ayodhya, tested the fidelity of his wife Sita in that manner. *Secondly*, let us subject her to impalement ; Pnjabati, the wife of Karna Sen, king of Mayna, offered herself to die in that manner praying for the boon of a son. *Thirdly*, let poisonous snakes be set against her ; Khullana,

BEHULA

the wife of Dhanapati Sadagar subjected herself to this form of trial.

‘ If Behula comes unscathed through all these ordeals, her fidelity will be proved, and the enjoyment by her of social life under the roof of her father-in-law will then be justified in the eyes of all.’

Nilambar Das approved the proposal and tried to influence Chand to act upon it. But the merchant, smitten with shame and mortification, bent his head low, not knowing what attitude was to be taken towards the vile accusers of his daughter-in-law, all of whom were his own relations. His face, however, betrayed the fierce resentment that burnt within him.

When Behula came to know of what was being said about her in the assembly of her father-in-law’s kinsmen, she came out from the interior of the palace and presented herself before them. She respectfully saluted the assembly and said : ‘ I prayed for, and have got back, my husband’s life. My desire has been satisfied. I understand you wish me to be driven away from this place ; very well, I shall go away of my own accord ; there is no need of subjecting me to any trial.’

BEHULA

Saying this she fell to the ground like a flower, and when people drew near and examined her, they found she was dead! The zealots were confounded and hurried away like men fearing for their lives, and those who loved Behula and welcomed her in their midst again, felt inexpressible grief at this new sorrow brought upon them by the zealots and hypocrites who had spoken those vile things about her.

But the girl who had been through such sufferings to win back her husband belonged to the immortals, and suddenly a flash of lightning was seen descending from the skies upon the lifeless body her spirit had just left, and soon afterwards the assembly were struck with awe as they saw Behula and Lakshmindra disappearing in the azure, on their way to heaven, with their heads aglow with a halo that belonged to the gods.

Then, it came to be known that Behula and Lakshmindra were no other than Usha and Aniruddha of Indra's heaven, who at one time had laughed at a nymph for her love, and, as a punishment, were condemned by Indra to suffer pangs of separation from each

BEHULA

other for eight successive lives. Now they were free again, and were once more united in ineffable bliss for ever.

Chand was now a changed man and the worship of Manasa Devi was soon after established permanently amongst the mortals here on earth.